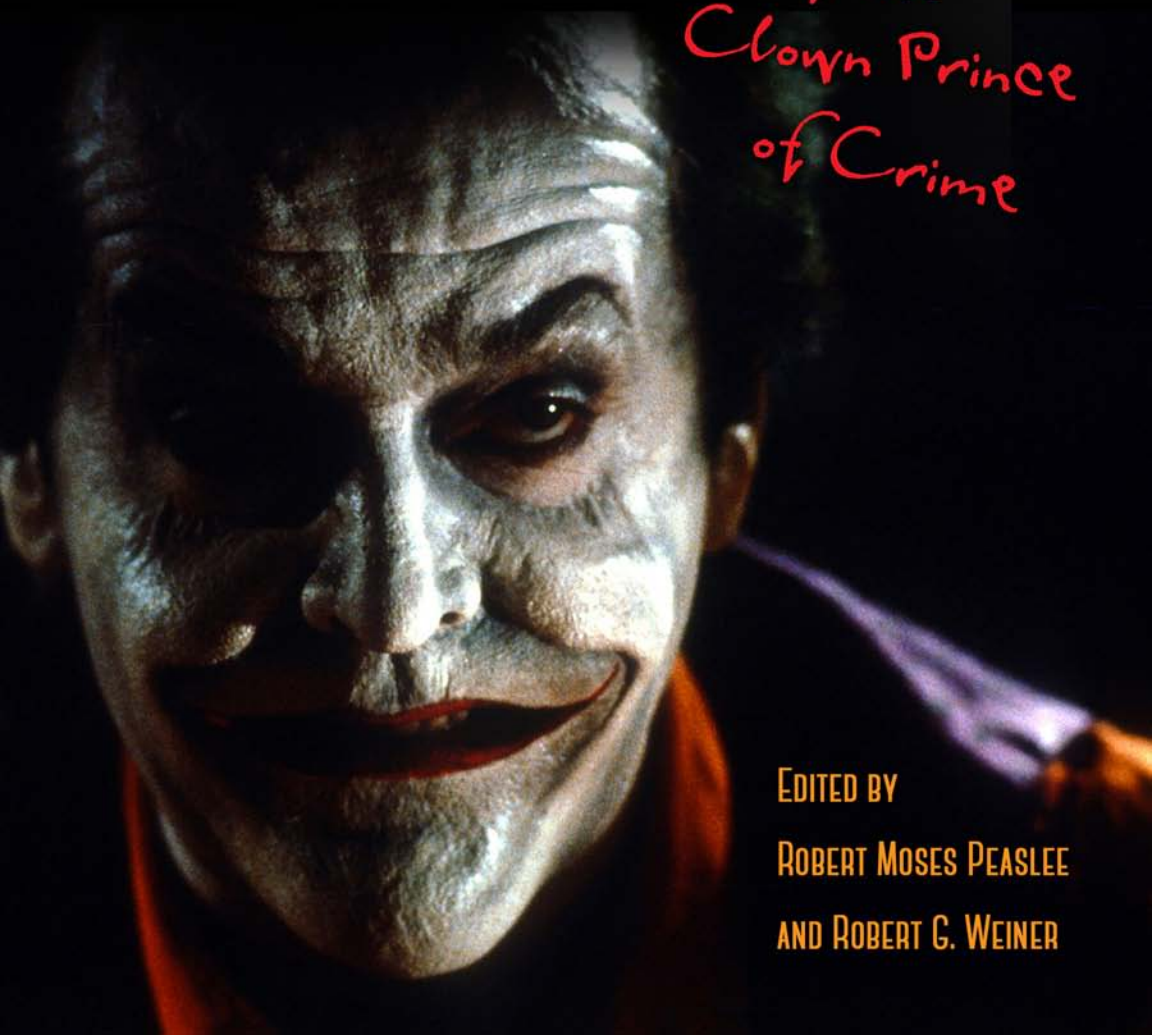
THE JOKER

A Serious Study of the Clown Prince of Crime



Edited by
Robert Moses Peaslee
and Robert G. Weiner

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Robert Moses Peaslee

I would like to offer profound and loving thanks to Kate Peaslee, whose unyielding support means and facilitates everything. This book is for Coen, who loves Batman, and Hazel, for whom I hope popular culture will continue to develop more active and powerful female characters. I would also like to thank Todd Chambers, Kent Wilkinson, Jimmie Reeves, and Glenn Cummins, for their continuing collegiality and mentorship; David Perlmutter and Jerry Hudson, for vision and opportunity; my students, for making clear to me how important it is that we study these "silly" things; and my mom and late dad, for putting me in a position to write anything at all coherent. Finally, thanks to Rob Weiner, who knows more than I do about so many things, but

never m akes m e feel lik e th e r elative p hilistine I s ometimes am. Y our c olleagues and your students are much better for our conversations with you.

Robert G. Weiner

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FOREWORD

Steve englehar t

Say you wanted to rob a bank. If you were serious about it, you'd figure out a plan that would actually get you in and out of the bank, with the money. It would probably not involve a pixilated parachuting pony.

But if you were the Joker, you'd just be getting started, because with him, well . . . he really wants to steal that money, but he also wants to dazzle the world (and one particular cowled person in it) with his audacity. *Anybody* can rob a bank, but only the Joker can do it with a pony from the sky. Alone in his aerie, the Joker works out how that pony is not just involved, but is actually the crucial part of the plan. When the squiffy Clydesdale lands atop a school outing and kills six children before galloping in panic down the middle of the street, no one will notice a man with a face like dead chalk in the alleyway.

But what's the fun in th at, really? No one *will* notice the Clown Prince of Crime, so even though he gets the money, he doesn't get the ego-boost. People say Wile E. Coyote is a super genius, but they don't say that about the Joker unless he reveals his genius—and a man with a face like dead chalk, with savage teeth and emerald hair, isn't much given to self-effacement. The solution is the Batman.

The Batman is not a madman. He's an uptight prig with a stick up his ass about criminals, and th at uptightness holds him together (in the Joker's analysis). No matter how far out he pushes himself, he always stays under control. He will not let himself go mad because that would rob him of his excellence (in his own analysis). The Batman lives on a razor's edge, to be as sharp as he can, while the Joker lives out beyond Pluto, to be as huge as he can. The Batman can see through a plot with a parachuting pony, but he could never conceive of it in the first place. That's what makes him the Joker's perfect nemesis: a man who wants to drag the Clown Prince back to Earth. That is a fate worse than death to the Joker, and so they war forever.

We don't live beyond Pluto, because we've made a largely unspoken pact that past a certain point, things are "crazy." Looked at from the outside, human behavior has a lot of latitude, but there are limits; transgress them and humans might lock you up. But transgress them and you'll see things no one else does. The Joker likes the last part and could care less about the first. If they lock him up, his mad mind is always free, and that mad mind is worth any temporary setback.

In his initial 1940s appearances, the Joker was 1940s scary. For one thing, every time the Batman caught him, he escaped and came back. Soon he was adjudged *too* scary, and so became a more traditional, circus-like clown. He remained as such until the early 1970s. Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams moved him back toward darkness, and I, modestly, made him completely crazy. After that, the crazy exploded; the point here, however, is that there were thirty-five years of prime real estate when the Joker was *not* what we think he's like now. Thirty-five formative years, with appearances everywhere Batman went, and yet when he went mad and bad again, people went for it immediately. Nobody objected that Marshall Rogers, Terry Austin, and I had destroyed a Joker they preferred. As soon as he became *himself*, everybody knew it.

So, what *is* that?

Let's see what the name tells us. The origin of the joker playing card is pretty prosaic. In the 1860s, the popular game of euchre needed a fifth jack, so the extra card was added (and, due to the way the printing laid out on a sheet, a second joker was also provided). Once the cards appeared, other games, such as poker, adopted them into their rules. So, we can note that the card was always outside the common reality, and that it had no fixed meaning. We can also note that some say its name comes from "euchre" and some say it comes from "jack." So, the Joker card seems to have had a loose grasp on identity in its genes.

Jokers produced in the following decades were usually jolly clowns, but a significant minority of them were sinister. When Conrad Veidt starred in the 1928 film, *The Man Who Laughs*, based on a novel by Victor Hugo, there was no connection. It took the minds of Bill Finger and Jerry Robinson, ghosting Bob Kane's Batman strip, to combine these strains into one memorable character, and in one of those moments of genius, they did. (Though they intended him to die after his first and only appearance, it was their editor who not only wanted him kept alive, but wanted him to appear in a second story of the four in his debut issue of *Batman* #1.)

You'll find it remarked in the following essays that the Joker has no fixed origin story. You'll find it remarked right here that for the Joker, nothing

is fixed. Any category he wanders into this time has no connection to any categories he might have inhabited last time, or will inhabit next time. If a parachuting pony led him to his greatest triumph yet, he would never do that again. Like a shark, he's moving forever forward, forever savoring the delicacies that come his way, reserved just for him because only he can sense them.

It's enough to drive any analyst crazy. Fortunately, however, these analysts are made of sterner stuff, and so they went out into the night and wrote this book . . .

INTRODUCTION

robert g. Weiner and robert Moses Peaslee

"Art is always better if it's bigger."
—The Joker, *Lego Batman: The Movie* (2013)

The collection you are about to read began to take its final shape in the summer of 2012, a summer that saw an American nation shaken by the tragic murders of twelve people in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado. Aurora was neither the first nor the last such mass shooting—prefigured, of course, by similar attacks in nearby Columbine, Colorado (1999, twelve dead) and at Virginia Tech University (2007, thirty-two dead), and followed by the unthinkable massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut (2012, twenty-six dead, all but six of whom were under the age of eight)—but it became concatenated with the culture surrounding what Brooker[1] has called the Batman "myth" by two prominent factors. Most obviously, the sole alleged perpetrator chose to carry out his horrific plan at a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises*,[2] the third and final film in Christopher Nolan's gritty, realistic Batman trilogy. In addition, as coverage of the tragedy unfolded in the ensuing hours, it was reported that the gunman had referred to himself as "the Joker" during interrogation,[3] that he had booby-trapped his apartment,[4] and that he had dyed his hair orange,[5] presumably to evoke comparison with the character at the center of this volume. Although his motivations or identifications may never be known, and in any case are insignificant relative to the pain and suffering of those injured or bereft as a result of his actions, there is no getting around the apparent connection between this event and the character of the Joker.

While we would consider any arguments suggesting a causal relationship between media representations and the actions of audiences myopic at best, it is nonetheless proper to linger over this connection and consider its influence on our thinking about popular culture and the socio-historical contexts

within which it is created, dispersed, and engaged. In particular, we might consider, as several authors herein and elsewhere do, just what the Joker represents today, and how that representation is related to our ongoing relationship, especially in the United States, with violence and "terrorism." The Joker, as a chaotic force of shifting or opaque origin—in psychiatric terms, a patient that "defies diagnosis"[6]—is particularly resonant in the temporal-cultural space of twenty-first-century American culture, where random, wanton violence is increasingly a dimension of the everyday.[7] Alongside the development of social history, meanwhile, the Joker's interpretation as a character in print and in motion pictures has evolved in specific and perhaps telling ways,[8] many of which are further considered below.

It is thus the *relevance* of the Joker to contemporary society that led us to undertake this project. A prominent character in popular culture by any measure, and, as we will discuss below, perhaps the world's most recognizable villain, the Joker merits scholarly attention, attention which has been steady, but spotty, in the past. The Joker has been analyzed as evocative of various theoretical programs, such as the Bakhtinian notion of the "carnival,"[9] Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory,[10] and Donna Haraway's notion of the cyborg.[11] He has been examined as an artist[12] and problematized in terms of race, particularly in Jack Nicholson's 1989 cinematic interpretation, interrogated as a form of blackface.[13] Villains, like heroes and the journeys they undertake, are of course archetypes, and Jung's trickster is the archetype most often invoked in thinking about the Joker,[14] as many of the pieces included herein aver. Riegler[15] goes on to suggest that while the previous manifestations of the Joker, such as Nicholson's interpretation of the character, indeed recall the trickster, more recent interpretations implicate the Joker as a "mastermind" (his disavowal in *The Dark Knight* of having a "plan" notwithstanding; the Joker planned things meticulously in this version of the character). Throughout, much of this careful thinking about the Joker connects him with or fuses him to his caped nemesis.[16] Knight describes the relationship between the Batman and Joker as "an intricate symbiotic relationship in that each co-creates the other, and have no existence or definition except in and through the other. From a psychological perspective, this essentially implies the monster (within and without) exists *simultaneously* side by side with the 'not-monster' aspects of the psyche."[17] This duality is framed in Jungian terms as the "shadow" archetype[18]—one that expresses the latent monstrosity of civilized society. Coogan echoes this thinking in his assignment of the Joker within a taxonomy of supervillains to the category of "inverted-superhero."[19]

The Joker—A Textual History

Related to the Joker/Batman duality is Alfred Hitchcock's remark, found in a 1962 interview with Francois Truffaut, that "the more successful the villain, the more successful the picture."[20] While Batman, Superman, and Spider-Man vie for supremacy as the most recognizable superheroes in the world, however, the Joker stands unquestionably above his villainous counterparts.[21] To date, the character has been featured in thousands of comics, numerous animated series, and three major blockbuster feature films dating back to 1966.

The Joker first appeared in DC comics *Batman* #1 (1940) as the typical gangster,[22] but the character evolved steadily into one of the most ominous in the history of sequential art. It is easy to see the influence on the Joker's creation of actor Conrad Veidt's performance in the 1928 silent horror film, *The Man Who Laughs*. Anyone who has seen pictures of Veidt as the laughing man Gwynplaine can attest to the uncanny similarities. While the creation of the Joker continues to create a certain amount of controversy, it is generally agreed that Bob Kane, Bill Finger, and Jerry Robinson all had a hand in the character's creation. However, artist Robinson is usually given the most credit.[23]

In the guise of a clown, the Joker plumbed readers' insecurities (due in part, no doubt, to *coulrophobia*: the innate fear of clowns).[24] The Joker's motivations are seldom clearly spelled out in any logical way. Like his namesake, he is a wildcard, a force of will, a compelling power that finds creative ways to unleash chaos and turn Batman's and Gotham City's worlds upside down.[25] As prominent Batman writer Grant Morrison points out, "If Batman was cool, the Joker was cooler. The pair shared the perfect symmetry of Jesus and the Devil, Holmes and Moriarty, Tom and Jerry."[26] Batman narratives are often more interesting when the Joker is somehow involved.

The Joker has the same status in the world of sequential art as any superhero.[27] The character was one of the first supervillains to receive an ongoing monthly comic, which debuted in the spring of 1975. The cover of the first issue features Batman's other foes, including Two-Face, the Penguin, and the Riddler. The Joker, meanwhile, is tearing a picture of Batman and making fun of the other villains calling them "two-bit baddies!"[28] While the series lasted only nine issues before cancellation, it illustrates that during the mid-1970s, when superhero comics continued to be the most widely read, DC took a chance presenting its greatest villain in a solo book. For fans of the character, a complete set of this series was often difficult to obtain and often commanded high collector prices. In 2013, DC finally saw fit to reissue the series as a complete graphic novel.[29]

f igure 1.1 t he first major comic book super villain to receive his own ongoing series: *The Joker* #1, May 1975. t he Joker knows he is the greatest of all villains, as the cover attests.

Throughout the Joker's tenure in the DC Universe, he has played jokes on and tried to kill Batman many times. He has killed hundreds of thousands of citizens of Gotham and worked with other criminal masterminds like the Riddler, Lex Luthor, Two-Face, and the Scarecrow. Working with the Joker, however, usually ends poorly. The Joker is not a "team player," and those who work with him usually end up regretting it. One prominent example is in the animated film *The Batman Superman Movie*.[30] Lex Luthor teams up with the Joker to kill Superman and finds nothing but chaos. Strangely, while henchmen who work for the Joker usually end up neither being paid nor even surviving various capers, the Joker never seems to run out those who are willing to work for him.

When DC was first putting together their original *Greatest Stories* (1987–88) series as full-length books featuring heroes like Batman and Superman, the Joker was included alongside them. It is very telling that there was no like consideration of Lex Luthor, Captain Cold, or Two-Face. DC later saw fit to release a special limited version of *The Greatest Joker Stories* in a deluxe purple hardcover.[31] In addition, the character was featured in the short story collection *The Further Adventures of the Joker*.[32] At the time of this writing, the Joker is the only comic book villain to have a volume devoted to his history: *The Joker: A Visual History of the Clown Prince of Crime*.[33] When DC Comics rebooted their entire comics lines with their "New 52" promotion in 2011,the Joker graced the first issue of *Detective Comics*.[34] Some of the most important and famous graphic novel storylines in the history of sequential art feature the Joker, including *The Dark Knight Returns*, *The Killing Joke*, *Death in the Family*, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, and *Mad Love*.[35] More recent incarnations include *Emperor Joker*, featuring Superman, *The Man Who Laughs*, and *Death of the Family*.[36]

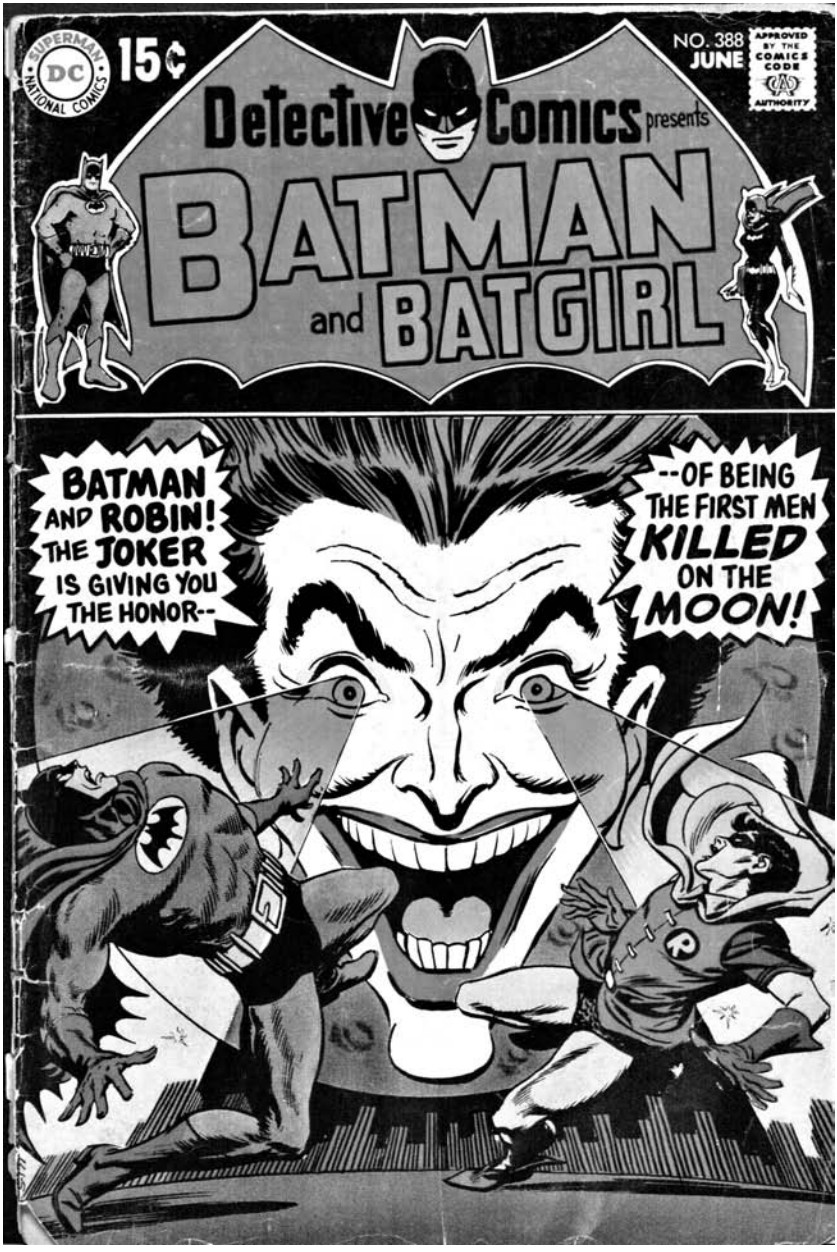
While origins of the Joker vary, the usual story is that he was created by falling in a vat of chemical waste (sometimes with Batman present), bestowing upon him his clown-like white skin, green hair, and ruby red lips. There have been numerous attempts to tell the Joker's origin story, with various writers putting their mark on the Joker mythology.[37] The first attempt was in *Detective Comics* #168 (1951),[38] in which the Joker was positioned as the criminal behind the Red Hood. Yet there really is no definitive origin story that sticks. The Joker himself often tells multiple versions of a story in the various comics, graphic novels, and films like *The Dark Knight*.[39] Unlike Marvel Comics' Wolverine, whose history was shrouded in mystery for years until the publication of *Origin*,[40] the Joker's complete personal history remains an enigma. Despite various writers' attempts to give the Joker a history, nothing

sticks completely as canonical or definitive. The Joker's origin remains contradictory. The Clown Prince of Crime's history—like his appearance and identity—mutates and changes as writers continue to recast it. It is this mystery that contributes to making the Joker compelling.

As Coogan suggests in his description of the Joker as an "inverted-superhero super villain,"[41] Batman needs the Joker, and the Joker needs Batman. Despite the fact that the Joker has killed thousands of people (some very close to Batman), Batman has steadfastly refused to kill his villainous counterpart. While doing so would save the world a great deal of suffering, Batman refuses to let the Joker die and, in fact, often tries to reason with him about their relationship. Toward the end of *The Killing Joke*, Batman tells the Joker that he sees no reason why they should continue to try and kill one another and that they could even collaborate together.[42] In the Marvel/DC crossover featuring Batman and the Punisher, just as Frank Castle is about to shoot the Joker in the head, Batman pulls the gun away. The Punisher is puzzled by this and points out to Batman that he could end the Joker's reign of terror with one bullet. Batman tells the Joker to "run for [his] life."[43] In *Cacophony*, Batman visits the Joker in the hospital and asks him point blank if the Joker "really" wants to kill him. The Joker responds by asking Batman the same question. Batman tells him, "I couldn't let you die." With an impish grin the Joker tells Batman, "But I do want to kill you."[44]

According to Coogan, the Joker "sees his crimes as art."[45] As the ultimate egoist, his actions are never driven solely by reason but also by a twisted aesthetic. Daniel Wallace reiterates this: "If it's not spectacularly theatrical, it's boring, and the [Joker's] audience might fail to see the humor in the horror. Like all actors, the Joker claims not to care what the reviewers think, but secretly [he] craves critical validation. And there's only one critic who matters: Batman."[46] One of the most artistic ways the Joker tried to kill Batman (and by default Robin) occurred in *Detective Comics* #388 (1969). Here, the Joker places Batman and Robin on an elaborate stage resembling the moon and tells them, "I have always regarded myself as the greatest criminal on Earth! . . . [and] my first lunar crime will be . . . the killing of Batman and Robin!"[47] Of course, Batman and Robin quickly figure out the Joker's ruse, but this illustrates one of the many elaborate schemes (and the Joker's penchant for drama) that occur time and time again in the character's history. Related to this is the Joker's connection to media technologies, which often play key roles in the nefarious plans he hatches.

As Dan Hassoun articulates below, the Joker has been portrayed on movie screens and television by a number of A-list actors, including Caesar Romero,



f igure 1.2 o ne of the more original ways the Joker tries to kill b atman and r obin, from *Detective Comics* #388, June 1969. Some of the creative phrases used to describe the Joker in the comic include: “Maestro of Malevolent Mirth”; “r ingmaster of r iotous r obbery”; “tycoon of teasing terror”; and the “Public *Luna*-tic n umber o ne.”

Jack Nicholson, and Heath Ledger (who won an Academy Award posthumously for his performance in *The Dark Knight*). The Batman films featuring the Joker are some of the most successful. *Batman: The Movie* was the film to see in the summer of 1966.[48] Much credit is given to Adam West and Burt Ward's deadpan "campy" depiction of Batman and Robin for the success of the 1960s Batman television program, but certainly Romero's representation of the Joker also contributed to the success of the show. It also helped further solidify the Joker as a popular villain in the minds of the public.[49] When producer Michael Uslan and director Tim Burton relaunched *Batman* as a feature film in the summer of 1989, they featured the Joker as Batman's nemesis, and director Christopher Nolan featured the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. While Romero's performance was evocative of the trickster, he still played the character with dignity and grace. Nicholson and Ledger gave the character a hard edge that walked the fine line between complete insanity and ultimate anarchy.[50]

On television, the 1990s show *Batman: The Animated Series* was known for its excellence in both animation and storytelling. Again, the Joker—this time voiced by Mark Hamill of *Star Wars* fame—was one of the most popular and interesting characters of the series. Although the Joker has also been voiced by notable talent including Larry Storch (*F-Troop*), Lennie Weinrib (*H. R. Pufnstuff*), Brent Spiner (*Star Trek*), and John Kassir (*Tales from the Crypt*), Hamill's voice is considered the most recognizable animated Joker in the various DC-related series and films. Hamill's Joker voice is so definitive that he was hired to portray him in the hit video games *Arkham Asylum* (2009) and *Arkham City* (2011). Hamill also performed the Joker's voice in the futuristic Batman animated feature *Batman Beyond: Return of the Joker*,[51] which was so controversial at the time of its release that two versions were released: one that was unrated and uncut, and one for children that made the Joker a little less edgy.

Despite all the comics, television shows, movies, video games, artwork, and fan fiction pitting the Joker and Batman in constant conflict, Batman writer Peter J. Tomasi is quick to point out that Joker's main goal is to make Batman "the best that you can be."[52] Scott Snyder's recent *Death of the Family* suggests that in his soul the Joker loves Batman and that love is reciprocated—whether Batman admits it or not. This love is not the romantic kind, but more like that of two brothers who are always at odds: a dysfunctional friendship, but one that gives the Joker a purpose. He sees Batman's extended family (the various Robins, Nightwing, Batgirl, Commissioner Gordon) as keeping the Caped Crusader from living up to his true potential.[53] The Joker

is Batman's polar opposite; like Batman, he has no real superpowers except an equally skilled mind. He is "chaos to Batman's logic and order."[54]

The Joker is recognizable to all ages, from the smallest children to those in their senior years. Walk into any toy store and you will find Joker action figures, trading cards, board games, banks, shoes, pajamas, and even socks. There are Joker toys for even the smallest of children. A brief look through WorldCat (a worldwide catalog of library materials) finds that there are more than 250 items listing the Joker as a subject, including books, films, video games, and even an audio production. A search on the word "Joker" and publisher DC yields more than 200 items. A Google search at the time of this writing yields more than 23 million hits for the phrase "the Joker," whereas "the Joker" combined with "Batman" yields around 11 million hits, illustrating the popularity and importance of the character. Despite this singular status, there has never been a full-length scholarly monograph or edited collection published with the Joker at its center (though this is certainly not true of Batman). The editors hope to rectify this gap in the literature of sequential art, film, and media studies, and present a series of articles collected with that goal in mind.

Reading This Volume

Moseley remarks quite correctly that "one challenge facing any discussion of the Joker involves determining which representations of the Joker are relevant."[55] The Joker as a character has exhibited through the decades of his existence both great consistency and significant alteration. Dan Hassoun begins our exploration, engaging the Joker's propensity to fluctuate as a character over time by analyzing a generally under-researched dimension of screen and media studies: performance. In prosecuting a deep reading of the Cesar Romero, Jack Nicholson, and Heath Ledger screen performances (but leaving aside those of voice actors such as Mark Hamill), Hassoun argues that the decisions of actors have a central importance when considering our collective interpretation of so prominent a character. Moreover, Hassoun's article serves as a case study for how performance studies might be more closely aligned with film and television analysis, to the respective fields' mutual benefit.

Eric Garneau disregards, in a way, the discussion Hassoun begins regarding the mutability of the Joker's identity by comparing him to a similarly unstable media character, Lady Gaga. Tracing the Clown Prince's development from Bob Kane to Heath Ledger, Garneau argues that both the Joker (particularly

in contemporary interpretations) and Lady Gaga present a kind of model for living in postmodernity, a "blurry, relativistic morass where identity comes from assembling bits and pieces of refracted culture." In Garneau's Butlerian analysis, while the Joker's lessons may be rather more violent in nature than the ones Lady Gaga proffers her "little monsters," they each "lead us to a conscious recognition that identity is constructed and performed," and that "one might argue that this recognition actually allows us to embrace humanity in a more meaningful sense."

In perhaps our most colorfully titled piece, Roy T. Cook asks, "Does the Joker Have Six-inch Teeth?" This simple question belies a deep and careful exploration—and ultimately a refutation—of the "panel transparency thesis": the premise that "characters, objects, events, and locations within the fictional world described by a comic appear, to characters within that fiction, as they are depicted within the panels of that comic." By way of Kendall Watson's explorations of "fictional truth," Cook examines the Joker's various physiognomies in print, suggesting that, "although the Joker cannot both have and not have six-inch teeth, there is nothing contradictory about imagining that he appears to us one way during one story and that he appears to us another way during another story." Suggesting that, given the Joker's "multiple choice" approach to outlining his origin story, we might best understand the rendering of the character to be always already a metaphorical act, Cook concludes counterintuitively that "we in fact know almost nothing about the Joker's appearance."

While the Joker's current transmedia persona is overwhelmingly a dark and violent one, David Ray Carter suggests that we move beyond contemporary interpretations and consider the deeper history of the character, particularly his manifestations in television and animated formats. Carter argues that the Joker's motivations and methods change according to the demands of era and medium, and that if we limit our investigation of the character to the more violent Joker enabled by sequential art and films aimed predominantly at mature audiences, we set aside much of the character's richness. A Joker who kills, Carter suggests, can only put Batman into "an ethical quandary that inevitably leads to Batman and the Joker being reduced to ciphers in a hypothetical moral question, and thus the subtle nuances of each character are overlooked." On television and in animation, however, creators must be sensitive to younger viewers and thus less reliant upon the narrative device of murder. Instead, Carter argues, viewers are treated to layered explorations of why the Joker does what he does, a mystery that anchors the character more comprehensively than sheer violence.

Moving from the realm of cinema and sequential art to that of politics, Emmanuelle Wessels and Mark Martinez consider the Joker's expediency as a symbol in the Tea Party's protest efforts against President Barack Obama's healthcare reform initiative. The "Obama-Joker," an Internet meme mashing up the visages of the Clown Prince and the chief executive, became a rallying image for the Tea Party movement, and Wessels and Martinez, using assemblage theory and psychoanalysis, "argue that the Joker's contemporary permutation as terrorist whose terror, in part, involves destroying capitalism and economic infrastructure," intersects with far-right American political ideology.

Tosha Taylor, in a way, provides an important response to our other contributors by considering the case of the Joker's "henchwench," Harley Quinn. As most analyses herein interrogate the Joker either in isolation or, more often, in comparison with his antithesis, Batman, Taylor's piece stands alone in analyzing the Joker as a gendered being. In particular, Taylor is interested in the grotesquely abusive nature of the relationship between Harley and the Joker, which, referencing Foucault and Butler's work, Taylor suggests "becomes a representation of the cyclical nature of gendered power struggles in which emotional and physical abuse are rooted in a desire for *and* a rejection of the gendered subject." In the Joker-Harley binary, the power of the former "as male subject derives, once he has become partnered with Harley, from ritualistic performances of male-on-female subjugation."

Engaging the Joker's potential for political symbolism, Richard Heldenfels suggests we read the character as a manifestation of Marxist thinking. Rather than seeing the Clown Prince in traditional ways—as insane, as an anarchist—Heldenfels suggests that "a crucial distinction between anarchists and Marxists involves the concentration of power," and that "the Joker, in fact, rejects some but not all authority, reserving his own power to guide the masses along his path. His terrorist acts are a 'dose of coercion' and . . . attempts to concentrate power not in the people but in himself." Heldenfels suggests one might see the Joker "occupying the middle stage Marx and Engels imagined between the dominance of the ruling class and the abolition of all classes, where the proletariat (embodied by the Joker) assumes the role of a ruling class until a classless society is achieved; on the other hand, the Joker could be seen as what Marxism became under Lenin and even more Stalin." In either case, an additional benefit of reading the Joker as Marxist is the necessary and preliminary step toward reading the Caped Crusader—since Batman is framed as the Joker's antithesis—as a fundamentally capitalist.

We move into the realm of digital and ludic paratexts with Vyshali Manivannan's analysis of the "Joker ethos" as one that "prizes cleverness, inventiveness, and Dadaist absurdity as much as the destabilization of social and emotional expectations," making it largely coterminous, Manivannan argues, with the ethos of "lulz." Defined as a kind of online emotional *schadenfreude*, lulz are the primary objective of those who antagonize interlocutors for the joy of sparking a reaction and partake in a "disrupter culture intrinsic to both trickster mythology and contemporary phenomena such as hacker culture and trolling." "Doing it for the lulz," Manivannan suggests, "mirrors the Joker ethos: it too seeks to transcend conventional rules of engagement, interrogate restrictive order, create social disjuncture, and above all take pleasure in provocation." Engaging the particular field of imageboard 4chan's Random–/b/ message board, Manivannan takes us into an under-researched milieu where under-theorized activities and practices take place, all while connecting the Joker back to the archetype of the trickster.

Kristin M. S. Bezio asks us to enter Arkham Asylum, more or less literally, as players of the eponymous 2009 video game produced by Rocksteady. In her analysis, Bezio carefully outlines how the Joker acts not only as a villain but also as a guide, a situation that puts the player in the awkward position of following him through the Arkham maze: "Throughout *Arkham Asylum*, the player is compelled to accept directives from the Joker, the one character he assumes he should not obey. In the game, the Joker orchestrates the primary narrative, forcing the player (and Batman) to either 'play along' or quit the game entirely." Engaging Derridean notions of the "nonspecies" and Bakhtin's analysis of the "carnival," Bezio argues that *Batman: Arkham Asylum* opens up a more stimulating—because far less stable—ludic environment, one which ultimately is contained by the Joker's game-ending decision to meet Batman in combat: "By agreeing to meet Batman on his own terms, the Joker has forsaken the only thing that gave him any power—after all, the Joker's goal in manipulating Batman is not to destroy Batman, but to force him 'to see the world as I see it.'"

Kim Owczarski takes us in a slightly different direction, exploring the Joker as a marketing tool in Warner Bros.' 2008 distribution of *The Dark Knight*. Already a rich case study in its use of paracinematic, ludic appeals to audiences, this campaign was made even more notable with the death of Heath Ledger just prior to the film's release. Suggesting that Warner Bros.' prolonged use of the Joker as synecdoche for the film was unconventional as an approach to marketing a tentpole film, Owczarski outlines the process of

the campaign's unfolding, taking a case study approach to one of the most ambitious promotional efforts Hollywood had yet seen. In particular, Owczarski argues that *The Dark Knight* benefited from a campaign that was the "culmination of several successful lessons about contemporary film promotion" that had begun with the largely Internet-driven success of *The Blair Witch Project*.[56]

Johan Nilsson begins our final section of articles that, in a variety of ways, use the Joker to illustrate theoretical programs, or vice versa. Nilsson brings into conversation Burton's 1989 film *Batman*, Frank Miller's highly influential graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns* (1996), and the film *The Dark Knight* (2008) to suggest a transmedia analysis of the Joker as satire. Nilsson relies upon a framework for understanding and analyzing satire suggested by Paul Simpson,[57] where "satire is never inherent in a text; it is constructed as satire in a kind of interactive event where a reader/viewer makes meaning based on the text in context." In the case of the Joker, it is his fundamentally ironic status—tragic and violent, but wearing the face of comedy—that brings him into the realm of satire. Nilsson suggests that, as a villain, the Joker provides a particularly apt satirical presence: "An important requisite for satire is that it creates a distance (usually through irony) between satire and text. If the Joker was to inspire sympathy, any satire set up by him would deteriorate, leading to an inability to maintain critical arguments."

Meanwhile, Ryan Litsey suggests a reading of the Joker as a "Nietzschean Superman." Applying Nietzsche to his reading of the video game *Batman: Arkham City*, Litsey argues that the "will to power"—a key feature of Nietzsche's notion of the Superman—"is evident in all things the Joker does." Suggesting by extension that Batman represents Nietzsche's "man of *ressentiment*"—the slave morality to the Joker's master morality—Litsey offers a careful exploration of the Batman/Joker duality, the applicability of which extends well beyond a single ludic narrative. "Understanding the Joker in this way," Litsey suggests, "can give us new insight into the appeal and power the Joker has traditionally held for audiences—the attraction of the Superman, latent in all of us, is made manifest in him."

Hannah Means-Shannon takes a Jungian approach to Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* and suggests that the milestone graphic novel's confounding symbolic vision suggests a reading of Arkham as the underworld. Moreover, Means-Shannon suggests that "when examining a text replete with psychoanalytical references and mythological motifs, it is appropriate to question the precise mythological

role that the Joker plays within this vast psychological metaphor." That role, Means-Shannon suggests, is obscured by the many archetypal possibilities provided by the Joker's representation, such as trickster, shadow, and anima. Rather, the Joker is "all of these things inclusively, and therefore a collective representation of the unconscious psyche": a ruler.

Mark P. Williams uses the Joker as a vehicle through which to meditate on "the reader's own relationship with the superhero form, and the superhero form's relationship with contemporary modernity." Focusing specifically on the character as he has been realized in the work of Grant Morrison, Williams suggests that the latter's work performs its "central conflicts through play with the opposing forces of cyclicality and progress" that characterize the superheroic narrative genre itself: "His *Batman* narratives make the double-bind of subversion-co-option central and the Joker a key player: the Joker teaches Batman how to regain agency against the totalizing backdrop of his endless ultimate enemies." In Williams's analysis, "Morrison has developed a theory of Batman-Joker directly analogous to avant-garde praxis: *détournement* and aesthetic collage of pre-existing elements to create new juxtapositions."

Michael Goodrum takes on the daunting task of viewing the Joker, and particularly his appearance in Nolan's film *The Dark Knight*, through the lens of Slavoj Žižek. Arguing against understanding Batman and the Joker simply as opposing forces—a hero and a villain, in the traditional sense—Goodrum suggests a reading employing the Žižekian notion of the "symptom." This reading allows a more nuanced understanding of Nolan's film, Goodrum argues, because it moves beyond seeing Batman solely as an agent of order counterposed to the Joker's agent of chaos: "Batman's presence makes villains mandatory, and his existence as an extra-legal force, a totalitarian blemish, renders the democracy he defends impossible." The Joker, meanwhile "is not a symptom of a disease afflicting the system, the Joker is a symptom of the system itself." Neither character, Goodrum argues, appreciates this dimension of their identity, which makes *The Dark Knight* a particularly rich post-9/11 text.

This brings us back, of course, to where we began this introduction: our argument that the Joker is not only the most well-known, most recognizable, or most popular villain in the history of popular culture, but also the antagonist most relevant to our historical moment. We hope that this volume and the careful work of which it is constituted will make this argument abundantly clear, and we look forward to the increasing frequency and quality of scholarly additions considering characters who attract us with their malevolence.

Notes

1. Will Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 152.

2. *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2008; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2008), DVD.

3. Richard Esposito, Jack Date, Pierre Thomas, and Lee Ferren, "Aurora 'Dark Knight' suspect James Holmes said he 'was the Joker': Cops," *ABC News*, last modified July 20, 2012, http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/aurora-dark-knight-suspect-joker-cops/story?id=16822251&singlePage=true#.UOyR0I4_6OI.

4. William Holden, "Slideshow: Aurora movie theater shooting," *KDVR Fox Television*, last modified July 23, 2012, http://kdvr.com/2012/07/20/slideshow-aurora-theater-shooting-scene-suspects-booby-trapped-apartment/.

5. Michael Muskal, "James Holmes makes court appearance in Colorado Theater Shooting," *Los Angeles Times*, last modified July 26, 2012, http://www.latimes.com/news/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-aurora-shooting-james-holmls-court-20120723,0,3068345.story.

6. Travis Langley, *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 2012), 152.

7. Of course, readers outside the U.S. might point out that the banality and ubiquity of terrorism (state-sponsored and otherwise) is rather old news, and therefore the Joker is also quite relevant to their experience. As United States citizens, the editors are aware of our privileged position in this regard; however, the increase of such instability in the everyday lives of average Americans, given that much—if not all—of the Joker's textual history has been produced in the U.S., is an important dimension of the character's development (and, perhaps, vice versa). See Zelda G. Knight, "Monsters and monstrous acts: Exploring the shadow archetype in Batman: The Dark Knight," *Inter-disciplinary.net*, last modified 2009, http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/thedarkknight-zeldaknight.pdf; Anthony J. Kolenic, "Madness in the making: Creating and denying narratives from Virginia Tech to Gotham City," *Journal of Popular Culture* 42 no. 6 (2009): 1023–39; Christine Muller, "Power, choice, and September 11 in The Dark Knight," in *The 21st Century Superhero: Essays on Gender, Genre and Globalization in Film*, edited by Richard J. Gray and Betty Kaklamanidou (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2011), 46–60.

8. See Brooker; Langley, 154–55.

9. See Brooker.

10. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

11. Donna Jean Harraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Mario Rodriguez, "Physiognomy & Freakery: The Joker on Film. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association. Singapore," last modified June 22, 2010, http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p403632_index.html.

12. Peter Coogan, *Superhero: Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin: MonkeyBrain, 2006), 78.

13. Andre Ross, "Ballots, Bullets, or Batmen: Can Cultural Studies Do the Right Thing?" *Screen* 31 no. 6 (1990): 26–44.

14. Elena Vassilieva, "Gothic Archetypes in Hollywood: The Trickster and the Double in Batman and The Mask," *Anglophonia: French Journal of English Studies* 15 (2004): 199–208; Langley, 171.

15. Thomas Riegler, "The 'Mastermind': Personifications of Evil in the Cinema," *Inter-Disciplinary.net*, last modified 2009, http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/riegler_paper.pdf.

16. See Brooker; Coogan; Knight and Daniel Moseley, "The Joker's Comedy of Existence," in *Supervillains and Philosophy: Sometimes, Evil is its Own Reward*, edited by Ben Dyer (Chicago: La Salle, 2009), 127–36.

17. Knight, 14.

18. Ibid.; Langley; J. Porterfield, review of *The Dark Knight*, *Psychological Perspectives* 52, no 2 (2009): 271–73.

19. Coogan, 72–74.

20. François Truffaut and Helen G. Scott, *Hitchcock*, rev. ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 191.

21. *Wizard Magazine* listed the Joker as the number one villain ever created (Mecha74, "Wizard magazine's top 100 greatest villains ever list," kaijuphile.com Forums, last modified June 4, 2006, http://www.kaijuphile.com/forums/showthread.php?t=12607); and the fifth greatest comic character of all time (Herochat, "Wizard's top 200 comic book characters," *Herochat.com*, last modified May 1, 2008, http://herochat.com/forum/index.php?topic=170859.0); IGN listed the Joker at number two (with the X-Men's nemesis Magneto as number one), see *IGN*, "Top-100 Villains," last modified 2011, http://comics.ign.com/top-100-villains/2.html.

The fifty-first episode, airing in November 2012, of the weekly Web program *Stacktastic*, sponsored by Bleeding Cool (2012), listed the Joker as the number one comic book villain of all time; see *Stacktastic*, "Stacktastic!: Top Ten Comic Book Villains," *YouTube.com*, last modified November 21, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxrNct02Ecg.

Foresman includes the Joker on a similar list; see Galen Foresman, "Making the A-List," in *Supervillains and Philosophy: Sometimes Evil is its Own Reward*, edited by Ben Dyer (Chicago: La Salle, 2009), 26; *The Dark Knight*, featuring the Joker, was at the time of this writing the fourth-highest grossing film in history. Altogether, the three films featuring the Joker have earned over $1.4 billion in worldwide box-office receipts.

22. Bill Finger, Bob Kane, and Jerry Robinson, "Batman vs. the Joker," *The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told* (New York: DC Comics, 1988; originally published in *Batman* #1, Spring 1940).

23. See Thomas Andrae, *Creators of Superheroes* (Neshannock, PN: Hermes Press, 2011),90–113; Christopher Couch, *Jerry Robinson: Ambassador of Comics* (New York: Abrams, 2009).

24. On p. 141, Brooker notes Bakhtin's argument concerning the late seventeenth-century containment of the carnivalesque, a significant dimension of which was the transformation in the Romantic period of the parodic "fool" into the tragic and terrifying "devil." See also S. N. Fhlaim, "'Wait Til They Get a Load of Me!': The Joker From Modern to Postmodern Villainous Slaughter," in *Villains and Villainy: Embodiments of Evil in Literature, Popular Culture and Media*, edited by Anna Fahraeus and Dikmen Yakah Çamoğlu (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 71–92Langley, 69.

25. The Joker was responsible for killing Jason Todd (the second Robin) and crippling Batgirl (Barbara Gordon), and he has been locked up in and escaped from Arkham Asylum numerous times. In the futuristic story, "Batman Digital Justice," by Pepe Moreno and Doug Murray (New York: DC Comics, 1990), the Joker is a computer virus that causes pandemonium (see Manivannan, this volume).

26. Grant Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011), 21.

27. At the July 2012 San Diego Comic-Con International, and in his book *The Boy Who Loved Batman*, *Batman* film producer Michael Uslan related a story about taking Jerry Robinson to see the premiere of *The Dark Knight* and telling the press in attendance, "Ladies and Gentlemen! This is Jerry Robinson, co-creator of the Joker." The press reportedly ignored the film's stars and was more interested in talking with and taking pictures of Robinson. Michael Uslan, speech given at San Diego Comic-Con International, July 2012; Uslan, *The Boy Who Loved Batman: A Memoir* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2011), 230.

28. See Denny O'Neil and Ive Novick, *The Joker* #1, May 1975 (New York: DC Comics), Cover.

29. Various, *The Joker: The Clown Prince of Crime* (New York: DC Comics, 2013).

30. *The Batman Superman Movie*, directed by Toshihiko Masuda (1997; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 1998), VHS.

31. Longmeadow Press, *Stacked Deck: Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told*, Deluxe Leatherbound Series (Stamford, CT: Longmeadow, 1990).

32. Martin H. Greenberg, ed., *Further Adventures of the Joker: All-new Tales of the Clown Prince of Crime* (New York: Bantam, 1990).

33.Daniel Wallace, *The Joker: A Visual History of the Clown Prince of Crime* (New York: Universe, 2011).

34. Tony S. Daniel and Ryan Winn, *Detective Comics* #1, November 2011 (New York: DC Comics).

35. See Frank Miller and Lynn Varley, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 1986); Jim Starlin and Jim Aparo, *Batman: A Death in the Family* (New York: DC Comics, 1988); Alan Moore and Brian Bolland, *The Killing Joke* (New York: DC Comics, 1988); Grant Morrison, and Dave McKean, *Arkham Aslyum* (New York: DC Comics, 1990); Paul Dini and Bruce Timm, *Batman Adventures: Mad Love* (New York: DC Comics, 1994).

36. Jeph Loeb and Ed McGuinness, *Superman: Emperor Joker* (New York: DC Comics, 2007); Ed Brubaker and Doug Manke, *Batman: The Man Who Laughs* (New York: DC Comics, 2008); Scott Synder and Greg Capullo, *Death of the Family*, October 2012–February 2013 (New York: DC Comics). At the time of this writing this is an ongoing series in the pages of *Batman* and related titles. The storyline first appeared in *Batman* #13 (October 2012). Other titles the story appeared in are *Batgirl*, *Batman and Robin*, *Catwoman*, *Detective Comics*, *Nightwing*, *Red Hood and the Outlaws*, *Suicide Squad*, and *Teen Titans*. It spanned twenty-three issues. The story has since been published in a number of graphic novels.

37. See Fhlaim.

38. Sheldon Moldoff and George Roussos, "The Man Behind the Red Hood," in *The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told* (New York: DC Comics, 1988; originally published in *Detective Comics* #168, February 1951).

39. See Nolan.

40. Joe Quesada and Bill Jemas, *Origin: The True Story of Wolverine* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2009).

41. Coogan, 72.

42. Moore and Bolland.

43. Chuck Dixon and John Romita, Jr., *Punisher/Batman in DC/Marvel: Crossover Classics II* (New York: DC/Marvel, 1998), 99.

44. Kevin Smith and Walter F. Flanagan, *Batman: Cacophony* (New York: DC Comics, 2009), 93–95.

45. See Coogan, 78.

46. Wallace, 105.

47. John Broome and Bob Brown, *Detective Comics* #388, June 1969 (New York: DC Comics), 11.

48. *Batman: The Movie*, directed by Leslie Martinson (1966; New York: Fox Video, 1989), VHS.

49. Robert G. Weiner, "Theatre of the Absurd: The 1966 Batman Movie," in *Gotham City 14 Miles: 14 Essays on Why the 1960s Batman TV Series Matters*, edited by Jim Beard (Edwardsville, IL: Sequart Research & Literacy Organization, 2011), 200–18.

50. Weiner, 203.

51. *Batman Beyond: Return of the Joker*, directed by Curt Geda (2000; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2000), DVD.

52. Peter J. Tomasi, quoted in *Necessary Evil: Super-Villains of DC Comics*, directed by Scott Devine and J. M. Kenny. (2013; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2013), Blu-ray.

53. Ibid.

54. Marv Wolfman quoted in *Necessary Evil*.

55. Daniel Moseley and Daniel Moseley, "The Joker's Comedy of Existence," in *Supervillains and Philosophy: Sometimes, Evil is its Own Reward*, edited by Ben Dyer (Chicago: La Salle, 2009), 127.

56. *The Blair Witch Project*, directed by Daniel Myrick; Eduardo Sanchez (1999; Santa Monica, CA: Artisan Entertainment, 1999), DVD.

57. Paul Simpson, *On the Discourse of Satire: Towards a Stylistic Model of Satirical Humor* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003).

1

THE CHANGEABLE TRICKSTER

SHIFTING MAKEUPS

The Joker as Performance Style from Romero to Ledger

dan haSSoun

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most common debates among Batman fans concerns who has best portrayed the Joker on film: Cesar Romero (*Batman* [1966] and its homonymous television series), Jack Nicholson (*Batman* [1989]), or Heath Ledger (*The Dark Knight* [2008]).[1] Comparative arguments of this sort are nothing new: fans have long delighted in placing related texts side by side in order to argue for a preferred or "definitive" textual feature. The surprising volume of discussion on the Joker, however, reveals not only the considerable impression the character has made over five decades of Batman film adaptations, but also the variety of interpretations brought to the Joker role over the years. After all, aside from a shared propensity for flamboyant costumes, these three performances could not be more different from each other. It is difficult to detect Romero's merry prankster within Nicholson's sarcastic gangster, just as neither seem present in Ledger's lip-smacking psychotic.

Clearly, there is not one, but many Jokers. Like most enduringly popular fictional creations, the Joker has repeatedly morphed his mannerisms, appearance, and *raison d'être* to meet the styles and trends of the time. Perhaps even more than his pointy-eared nemesis, the Joker does not have a primary urtext, leaving the precise definition of his character scattered over numerous texts from multiple generations.[2] Previous scholarship has taken several perspectives in explaining these character fluctuations, ranging from changes in the ideological *zeitgeist*;[3] to negotiations between producers and fan communities;[4] to efforts by corporations to stretch their characters across multiple media platforms and target audiences;[5] to socio-historical trends in pop culture and the comic book industry.[6]

While acknowledging the importance of these perspectives in analyzing historical change, this essay considers the varying Jokers in relation to a source that is much more obvious, but nevertheless widely disregarded: the actor. As perhaps the most publically visible interpretations of the Joker, screen performances have been crucial locus points of the character's historical shifts, especially for countless consumers who never picked up a comic book. Accordingly, I will argue for the centrality of acting to our engagement with the Joker within specific texts, as well as our general understandings of "Joker-ness" over time. In the first section, I defend the value of performance studies for film analysis and outline ways in which we may study the craft of acting onscreen. In the second section, I bring this mode of analysis to bear on the work of Romero, Nicholson, and Ledger, tracing (1) how their performative choices shape the meaning of their respective Jokers, and (2) how these performances fluctuate over several decades of changing cinematic style.

Whither the Actor?

Within film scholarship, actors are cattle, to paraphrase Alfred Hitchcock. Although performers are among the most discussed cinematic elements for the general public (if I only had a nickel for every time acquaintances both inside *and* outside academia began and ended their thoughts on a film by commenting on the quality of its acting), the study of performances has encountered conspicuous silence within film studies.

The reasons for this neglect are methodological as well as institutional. Perhaps some scholars, observing the attraction that performances carry for laypeople, conclude that actors are too banal a point of study for their interests, or that analyses of acting cannot have their own critical vocabulary.[7] The overall methodological thrust of film studies has further occluded most rigorous considerations of acting. Early writers, inspired by Soviet montage theory or French auteur perspectives, de-emphasized performers in order to argue the importance of editing or the artistry of specific directors.[8] The move into psychoanalytic and semiotic theory in the 1970s further marginalized actors in favor of broad inquiries into social sign systems and cinema's linguistic functions,[9] while the subsequent poststructuralist turn critiqued the very notion of "the individual," much less the actor.[10] Today, scholars are usually keen to interpret a character's meaning within the narrative, but they take for granted the means by which the players modeled their actions in accordance with other filmic elements in order to convey that meaning.

In contrast to film theory's reticence, there has been a sizable amount of work on actors done within celebrity and star studies. This literature, however, tends to treat performers as cultural signs in and of themselves, embodying social ideals or illustrating discursive tensions between public and private life.[11] Consequently, most studies limit their focus to the performer's persona as a unified system across a body of texts, and how instances from the subject's personal or private life either reinforce or subvert this star image. Within film analysis, this perspective treats actors as signifying their star systems whenever they step before the camera, as if the films capture the "natural behavior" of actors simply playing themselves.[12]

One example of this approach—and one of the only academic commentaries on a Joker performance as of this writing—occurs in Justin Wyatt's book *High Concept*, when the author reserves several pages to discuss Jack Nicholson's turn in the 1989 *Batman*. Wyatt argues that Nicholson's role offers viewers a stable set of star meanings, insofar as it plays off the actor's image as the lovable nonconformist familiar through texts such as *Easy Rider* (1969), *The Last Detail* (1973), and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975). These associations allow audiences to accept Nicholson's "bad boy" performance as the Joker, thereby placing the wild nature of the role within a structure of existing star expectations.[13] "The effect," Wyatt writes, "is a curious match between Nicholson-as-star and Nicholson-as-character which maximizes his star status."[14]

While Wyatt is correct that Nicholson's presence shapes viewer expectations in certain ways, his argument relies upon several misguided presumptions about how actors convey meaning. Wyatt assumes that a star's very presence within a film transmits a stable set of personality traits to the audience. However, actors never convey their characters by merely standing in front of the camera. Rather, they always produce "meaning precisely through doing"—namely, through flows of movement that allow viewers to infer information about their characters' intentions and emotional states over time.[15] To be fair, Wyatt does briefly discuss Nicholson's "broad, ostentatious" style of acting, but he does so primarily to relate it to Nicholson's "pre-sold" star connotations, and to argue that the Joker is an excessive presence that "destroys the unity of each of his scenes."[16] When it comes to comprehending precisely how the Joker's gestural and vocal choices convey a sense of excess, however, Wyatt's description of Nicholson's screen persona remains overly broad and vague.

A more nuanced analysis of screen acting should move beyond "the meaning of the performer" to more considerations about "the meaning of

performance."[17] According to James Naremore, this involves recognizing how actors *use* their bodies and voices to communicate meaning to viewers; after all, watching performance is always fundamentally taking "delight in bodies and expressive movement" itself.[18] This perspective forces us to take seriously the labor, training, and craft of the acting process, and disregard our impulse to treat the actor's work as all-too-easy. Even in a special effects-packed Batman production, we must resist the fallacy (sometimes popularized by actors themselves) that performances involve purely physical demands rather than real oratorical or emotional labor.[19]

Instead, we should see how the performer's choices function within the film's other stylistic devices. Quite often, we find that other elements of film art that receive wider academic attention—such as editing, lighting, or framing—may function primarily to direct the viewer to the actors' performative actions. Even Lev Kuleshov, whose name is now synonymous with montage theory, had to admit that, oftentimes, "an idea must be expressed through the actor's work above all."[20] Insofar as the actor expresses detail through movement itself, there are arguably few devices that carry as much uniquely *cinematic* potential as performance (even if acting itself well predates the cinema).

Recent research in cognitive psychology further suggests that audiences draw upon the human face and body to anchor their emotional responses toward events on-screen. As it turns out, there is little cognitive difference between viewing co-present interactions in the real world and watching the same actions on a film screen.[21] This is hardly surprising: as social creatures, our attentions tend to drift toward the most interesting elements of our surrounding space—namely, the faces and bodies of other human beings. For performers, this means that no detail is too small when expressing detail about their characters: from the slightest shake of the hand to dart of the eyes, actors carefully plan each of their filmed movements, weighing how best to verbally or non-verbally emphasize the physical and emotional qualities of the scene.

For scholars, this reveals how performances draw from a bank of possible gestures, motions, and intonations, most of which are familiar to us from our everyday interactions. A comparative-historical study of film acting, therefore, should concentrate on two issues. First, there is the (admittedly elusive) question of origin: *how* and *why* did the things we see on-screen get there? At the most basic level, this could imply an examination of individual performers' working methods, training, or background in order to uncover the assumptions about craft that the actor brought to the role. On a broader level,

we may focus on a variety of contextual factors, including the film's overall style and tone, the director's preferred mode of working with actors, the type of production, the employed editing style and speed, dominant perceptions about filmic realism, and other historical-aesthetic constraints that could impact acting decisions. Of course, these factors and contexts often converge and intertwine with one another, making clean judgments about causality difficult to make with any real finality. Much like the Joker himself, performances have multiple and mysterious origin stories.

Second, there is the question of function: *what* precisely do we see on-screen and *how* does it contribute to our understanding of the character? Note that this is distinct from questions of interpretation. For the purposes of this analysis, I am less interested in demarcating exactly *what* a given performance "means," which will always vary by the observer's historical place and intellectual allegiances (for instance, arguing that the Joker signifies a terrorist, a minstrel, or a queer threat). Rather, following David Bordwell, I am more interested in suggesting *how* a performance is able to signify meaning in the first place.[22] This line of inquiry leads us back to the analysis of movement, specifically the way in which actors signify not through static images or poses (though to be sure, the Joker does leave an indelible visual impression), but through the actual process of motion and performance itself. Regardless of whether we can uncover a precise origin or intention behind each performative choice, the actions remain preserved on-screen for us to consider their overall effects.[23] Considering the affective dimensions of Cesar Romero, Jack Nicholson, and Heath Ledger respectively, it becomes possible to chart not only the evolution of the Joker over five decades of Hollywood filmmaking, but also the aspects of the character that have captured millions of viewers' imaginations.

"You've Changed Things": The Joker's Screen Evolution

Changes Across Cinematic Style

From their earliest training, film actors often learn to plan the duration, intensity, speed, and emphasis of their motions in relation to the compositional and rhythmic style the movie employs. Depending on a particular scene's lighting, camera placement, and lens length, certain features of the actor become more highlighted than others. This exclusivity forces the actor to be conscious of which parts of her or his body appear in the frame, and

how best to play the scene using the available space.[24] Shot length is also key. Performers must rehearse their actions to match the director and cinematographer's timing requirements, which further informs their choices: a motion developed over ten seconds naturally requires a different level of energy than one developed over five.[25]

While specific styles always vary by production, certain regularities about the "proper" way to make movies exist during different periods of history. Hollywood's production norms have evolved dramatically from the *Batman* of 1966 to *The Dark Knight* of 2008. David Bordwell argues that since the sixties the industry has moved to a form of "intensified continuity," encouraging faster editing, constant camera movement, and closer shots. The average shot length (ASL) for a full feature has plummeted from roughly eleven seconds between 1930 and 1960 to only a couple of seconds by the early 2000s. Contemporary filmmakers are noticeably less judicial with their cuts: they not only cut more frequently, but are also less timid than their predecessors about cutting on movement.[26]

Perhaps the most significant change (at least for actors) involves the increased popularity of tight single shots. Traditionally, studio filmmakers based their editing off a single master shot of the scene (i.e., a wide view of most or all of the principles doing a run-through of the entire scene), cutting in to closer shots of characters or objects for any necessary emphasis. Most scenes would play out with actors (especially males) framed in medium-long shots that cut them off around the waist or knees (the so-called *plan américain* shot), and shots pairing two or more performers in layered proximity were fairly common.[27] In contrast, today's productions may jettison master shots altogether and frame the scene entirely through medium shots or close-ups of each individual actor. Rather than staging multiple actors in a single, wider shot, filmmakers now will shoot close views of one actor reading their lines and then cut to individual reaction shots of the other characters.

In short, today's films edit more, cut faster, and frame tighter. Actors now must register their actions more quickly, against a moving camera, and alone in the shot. This style moves the entire locus point of meaning from their bodies to their faces. Bordwell summarizes as follows:

> The pressure to use closer views has narrowed the expressive resources available to performers. In the studio years a filmmaker would rely on the actor's whole body, but now actors are principally faces. . . . Mouths, brows, and eyes become the principal sources of information and emotion, and actors must scale their performances across varying degrees of intimate framings.[28]

Indeed, the idea of screen acting as close-up face-contortion has become so naturalized that acting manuals today tend to treat it as a general truism.[29]

Few roles have so dramatically embodied these changes as the Joker. Even a cursory look at the introductory scene of the Joker in each film is revealing. Cesar Romero's first appearance in *Batman* (1966) occurs at the headquarters of the United Underworld. The scene begins with an establishing shot of the United Underworld logo before cutting out to a long shot of the Joker wildly cackling and flailing about in *plan américain*. He conjures a bouquet of trick flowers before prancing off to screen right, where the camera pans to reveal fellow baddies Penguin (Burgess Meredith) and Riddler (Frank Gorshin) also on set. The camera maintains this wide to medium-wide position for most of the proceeding scene, a shot setup very common for the *Batman* TV series, as well as many other multi-camera television productions of the era.[30] Director Leslie Martinson, who shot the film under a rushed schedule, intentionally mimicked television cinematography because it allowed him to stage the action across multiple shots without changing the lighting setups.[31]

Despite its rather simple production style, this early scene quickly establishes the contours of Romero's Joker. Framed in long shot for the majority of the scene, Romero has ample screen space to extravagantly throw his arms away from his body and move about. The available space, along with the film's high-key lighting scheme, bright color saturation, and high ASL (the scene averages 10.81 seconds/shot), lends this Joker a full-bodied physicality. And Romero certainly takes advantage of this display. Actors in long shot always have to perform more "loudly" in order to be noticed, and Romero allows almost all of his actions to take on a broad theatricality: instead of walking, he prances, emphatically bending his knees and kicking one leg in front of the other; when electrocuting Penguin and Riddler with a trick hand buzzer, he stresses it with a slap down on each of their hands; and when reciting a line, he tends to raise his hands and arms outward for added emphasis. Romero gives all his gestures a feeling of controlled rapidity, enacting motions with a high degree of energy but letting them linger in space like cartoonish poses.

Compared to Romero's full physicality, Jack Nicholson's performance twenty-three years later is more oriented around the upper torso. Unlike the 1966 feature, which relied heavily upon medium long shots and arranging several characters within the frame at once, Nicholson's Joker is typically filmed in medium to medium close shots by himself. This camera placement, combined with *Batman*'s darker lighting scheme that distinguishes Nicholson's white makeup from the surrounding shadows, places greater emphasis

on Nicholson's upper body, especially the face. The medium framing forces Nicholson to move his hands within a closer radius to his body and, despite the energy that the actor invests in each motion, also keeps his version of the Joker relatively still (compare this to Romero, who is often flouncing all across the screen). Only in a handful of instances, such as the scene where he merrily vandalizes an art museum to Prince's "Party Man," is Nicholson afforded the necessary screen space and shot duration to echo Romero's physical ostentation.

Lacking the full use of his body, Nicholson transfers most of his dramatic emphasis to his face. Rather than expressing excitement through a skip or a dance, he signs it through a raised eyebrow, a widening of the eyes, or, of course, that hideously full-faced grin. How appropriate, then, that the film's spectacular debut of the Joker—when the character "returns from the dead" to murder mob boss Carl Grissom (Jack Palance)—places such intense revelatory focus on the face. The scene (ASL: 6.29 seconds/shot) begins with Nicholson cloaked in silhouette, but when he eventually walks forward into a key light illuminating his face, the camera rapidly zooms into a low-angle close-up of his head, as if presenting it as the epitome of the character's transformation. After cracking, "As you can see, I'm a lot happier," the Joker's smile widens and his eyebrows rise into a look of devilish self-amusement, the prelude to a murderous outburst (he begins frenetically shooting Grissom directly afterward). Nicholson's frequent, yet controlled facial gesturing, along with makeup that contorts the sides of his mouth into a constant grimace, lends his Joker a perpetually sarcastic air.[32]

If Nicholson's tongue is always planted firmly in his cheek, Heath Ledger's tongue is always swarming about. *The Dark Knight* epitomizes nearly all of the stylistic tropes of contemporary Hollywood, from the rapid editing rate to extremely tight singles for dialogue scenes. As a result, Ledger's Joker, with very few exceptions, is virtually all face. Filmed in close-up for nearly all of his major scenes, Ledger communicates almost entirely through his eyes and mouth, resulting in the "darting eyes, waggling brows, chortles, and restless licking" of the lips that immediately became focal points for parody and emulation among many Bat-fans.[33] Ledger himself corroborated this, stating in interviews that he felt his performance was "less about his laugh, more about his eyes."[34]

When Joker first reveals his face at the end of *The Dark Knight*'s opening bank heist, the film frames Ledger so tightly that even the top of his head and bottom of his chin are cut out, a striking shift from the long shot that opened Romero's appearance in 1966. Ledger's first major dialogue scene, when Joker

crashes a meeting of the Gotham City underworld and demonstrates his so-called "pencil trick," maintains a similar facial proximity. Taking advantage of his intimacy with the camera, Ledger slides between signifiers of extreme control and compulsiveness by strategically varying the intensity of his stare and tightness of his lips. When conveying nonchalance, Joker's eyes tend to rove from side to side, his composure is loose (relaxed shoulders), and his mouth appears slightly unfastened, with the tongue darting in and out at unexpected intervals. When perturbed or angered, however, his eyes harden into a deadly glare, his lips tighten, and his head tilts forward. The extremely short shot length of the film (only 3.16 seconds/shot in the "pencil trick" scene) also means that Ledger's movements are not only close, but also quick.[35] This propensity for rapid facial motions may in part explain why Ledger's Joker comes across more as a compulsive psychotic than do Romero or Nicholson.[36]

Changes Across Performance Methods

To raise an obvious point, Cesar Romero, Jack Nicholson, and Heath Ledger are not the same person. Even accounting for the way their performances adapt to production styles, each actor brought his own personal histories, eccentricities, and methods to the Joker role. Consideration of these details allows us to see performances as not merely grounded in historical or aesthetic determinations, but as resulting "from ideologically informed but conscious decisions made by individuals."[37]

The three actors arrived at their respective Batman films with a variety of acting backgrounds and influences in tow. Prior to his late-career casting in the *Batman* television program, Cesar Romero was best known for roles in musical comedies and light romances during Hollywood's studio era. Trained as a dancer on the nightclub circuit and Broadway before turning to film acting, he was an intensely physical performer known for his debonair attractiveness and comedic abilities. All accounts suggest that, while Romero brought a reliable quality of work to his job as the Joker, he never regarded his *Batman* performance as anything more than a frivolous amusement. By his own admission, never a "great student" of the Batman,[38] he would later remember the role as a relatively simple one to perform. "You just fall right into it," he recalled in one interview. "It was just a ball to do."[39] Adam West corroborates this level of casual glee Romero brought to the set, even recalling that Cesar would regularly nap between shots until it was time to film. In a famous anecdote, Romero also refused to shave his trademark moustache for the role, proclaiming that he would rather lose the part than his "mystique."[40]

In contrast, Jack Nicholson came of age during the demise of the classical studio system and received his performance training throughout the 1950s. One of his most influential mentors, Jeff Corey, was renowned for his Stanislavsky-inspired method of encouraging students to play and improvise within the boundaries of their role. The description of Corey's method directly presages Nicholson's Joker role thirty years later: "Be unpredictable. Go for laughter where someone might think 'tears.' Interrupt yourself with sudden, inexplicable rage." Above all else, though, "be yourself."[41] Nicholson's eventual work would be a bricolage of old studio "personality acting" with recognizable trademarks and newer Method-influenced strategies of improvisation and self-analysis.[42]

A childhood collector of DC Comics, Nicholson took his casting as Joker seriously, co-writing his own dialogue[43] and prepping his mannerisms through conversation with Batman co-creator Bob Kane and screenings of Conrad Veidt's performance in *The Man Who Laughs* (1928), which partially inspired the character.[44] The more improvisational side of Nicholson's personality reportedly thrived on the set of *Batman*, where Tim Burton allowed the player to play around within certain boundaries.[45] "He can come up with different approaches to a scene time after time, and I'd find myself wanting to do extra takes just to see what we would do," Burton claimed in one interview.[46] Nicholson advised against taking a comic book movie too seriously, however, allegedly advising co-stars Michael Keaton and Kim Basinger on-set to "let the wardrobe do the acting."[47]

In many ways the polar opposite of Romero and Nicholson, Heath Ledger never received formal acting instruction, instead cultivating and modifying his craft from job to job. When asked about his method, Ledger would reply, "I don't have a technique . . . I've never been a believer in having one set technique on how to act. There are no rules and there is no rulebook. At the end of the day, it all comes down to my instincts."[48] Ledger framed his approach to the Joker in similarly impulsive language: "Somewhere inside of me, I knew instantly what to do with [this character] . . . I didn't have to search, I had a plan of attack. Part of me feels like I've been warming up [to playing the Joker] for years."[49] For at least a month during preproduction of *The Dark Knight*, Ledger isolated himself to a hotel room, experimenting with voices and compiling a "Joker diary" filled with disturbing ideas and images to help guide his approach.[50] Filming exhausted him, and by the end of production he admitted to only sleeping a couple of hours a night.[51] Urban legends persist to this day that this immersion into his "inner clown" deepened the dependence on the prescription antidepressants that lead to his untimely death in January 2008.

The wildly different discourses surrounding these actors have interesting parallels with the history of screen acting writ large. The evolution of acting across the twentieth century is often simplistically summarized as the move from the star system to the more studied turn to the Method in the 1950s, beginning with the "raw" performances of figures like Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift. A more accurate portrait, however, would be that screen acting has generally changed its priorities from star personality to improvisation to impersonation. Bordwell has summarized this shift as the growing expectation for "serious" actors to "shape-shift for every project—acquiring accents, burying their faces in makeup, gaining or losing weight."[52] Where classical performers were advised to sculpt recognizable trademarks across roles, and Method actors had to find themselves within the character, today's performers are expected to *inhabit* their roles as an indication of their depth and complexity.

Ledger's performance occurred during a historical moment when self-transformation and obsessive embodiment were seen as markers of "quality" acting. Unsurprisingly, the marketing blitz surrounding the film repeatedly referenced Ledger's performance in order to back *The Dark Knight*'s status as a psychologically deep work. Director Christopher Nolan was extremely outspoken on this front, claiming that Ledger literally "became" the role: "Everything about what he does from every gesture, every little facial tick, everything he's doing with his voice—it all speaks to the heart of this character."[53] This discourse of psychological complexity recalls Richard Dyer's idea that, for an image to register as "authentic," it must gesture to a truth lurking beneath the surface.[54]

While he could not have foreseen how viewers would read his performance following his death, Ledger certainly crafted his expressions with a goal of authenticity in mind. Beyond merely connoting psychosis, the Joker's facial and vocal fluctuations rhetorically function to imply a complexity extending beyond the mask. When told midway through the "pencil trick" scene that he is crazy, Joker suddenly freezes his composure and glares at his accuser unblinkingly (with the exception of his right eye, which twitches once). While vocal qualities are impossible to replicate through the written word, they are essential to how Ledger sells his reaction. "No, I'm not," he replies, quickly and softly, before repeating the line with increased pause and emphasis on each word: "No . . . I'm . . . not!" (with exaggerated enunciation on the final "t" in "not"). The Joker's octave-shifting voice has been the subject of much discussion, and is most prominently displayed during the scenes when he explains the origins of his scars. His vocal tone shifts registers at unexpected beats, conveying an odd mixture of narcissism, pain, sarcasm, and deathly

seriousness from moment to moment. His eyes, which tend to roll back or dart sideward, further sell an image of introspection.

Compare this to Romero and Nicholson. As would be expected from his background, Romero embraces the irreverent surface details of his character. The very image of untroubled glee, he shouts his lines with what Chuck Dixon observes as "the painfully-correct elocution of an American theater actor."[55] Nicholson displays some of the emotional shifts that Ledger does, but his voice remains leveled throughout his film and his overall sarcasm is very rarely in doubt. Clearly, the expectations and strategies brought to the character have changed markedly over the decades, transforming the Joker from a character not worth shaving over to an Oscar-winning one worth dying for.

Conclusion

To be clear, these changes in performance style run concomitant with many other cultural changes in the Joker, some of which the feature films spearheaded, and some of which they followed. The greater privileging of psychological "depth," for instance, is also observable in the Neal Adams/Dennis O'Neil era of Batman comics starting in the 1970s. The shifting focus from the body to the face also echoes a similar move in comics imagery, from the splash covers of oversized Jokers in the Dick Sprang era to the grotesque eye- and mouth-centered covers of Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum* and Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo's *Joker*.[56]

Furthermore, the differences between these performers and performances should not be overemphasized. In all of his incarnations, the Joker has been a trickster figure that thrives on thwarting expectations and hovering in the uncomfortable, yet mesmerizing zone beyond what description can encapsulate. If there is one thing shared by all of the screen Jokers, it is their devilish capacity for stealing the show. Roger Ebert said it best in his review of *Batman* that the villainous clown so captures viewer attention in every scene that we must sometimes remind ourselves not to root for him.[57] Then, as always, the Joker remains a magnet for viewer attention, a testament to all of the performers whose talents have made the character so compelling, fascinating, and, yes, fun for so many generations.

It has been my contention in this piece that comparative acting analysis can help probe what has made the Joker consistently intriguing across multiple manifestations. By giving this oft-neglected element of film style its due, we may better understand the changes in the media industry over time, while

still maintaining our focus on why audiences continue to give their time to its products—not because they are necessarily duped, manipulated, or coerced, but because they are genuinely entertained. As film styles change over time and the cultural capital of various characters ebbs and flows, let the debates over who played the "best" Joker continue to rage.

Notes

1. Mark Hamill—who provided the voice for the Joker on *Batman: The Animated Series* and several other animated films, TV shows, and video games—is occasionally included on this list. Without discrediting the flair and talent that Hamill has brought to these versions of the character, this study focuses exclusively on live-action performances because the mode of acting involved in animated voice work is too fundamentally different (though certainly deserving of its own study).

2. William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson, "'I'm Not Fooled By That Cheap Disguise,'" in *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, edited by Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio (New York: Routledge, 1991), 185.

3. Thomas Andrae, "From Menace to Messiah: The History and Historicity of Superman," in *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*, edited by Donald Lazere (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 124–38.

4. Uricchio and Pearson, "'I'm Not Fooled By That Cheap Disguise.'"

5. Derek Johnson, "Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up?: Marvel's Mutation from Monthlies to Movies," in *Film and Comic Books*, edited by Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew McAllister (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 285–300.

6. Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

7. Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke, *Reframing Screen Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 1.

8. André Bazin, "On the *politique des auteurs*," in *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950s: Neo-realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, edited by Jim Hillier (London: British Film Institute, 1985), 248–59; Sergei Eisenstein, "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form," in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, edited by Jay Leyda (San Diego: Harcourt, 1969), 45-63.

9. Raymond Bellour, "The Obvious and the Code," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, edited by Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 93–101; Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

10. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

11. For two compelling examples, see Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986); Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

12. Baron and Carnicke, *Reframing Screen Performance*, 66.

13. Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 31.

14. Ibid., 32–33.

15. Paul McDonald, "Supplementary Chapter: Reconceptualising Stardom," in *Stars*, by Richard Dyer (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 182.

16. Wyatt, *High Concept*, 33.

17. Paul McDonald, "Why Study Film Acting?: Some Opening Reflections," in *More Than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance*, edited by Cynthia Baron, Diane Carson, and Frank P. Tomasulo (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 25.

18. James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 2.
19. See Thomas Austin, "Men in Suits: Costume, Performance and Masculinity in the Batman Films," in *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, edited by Thomas Austin and Martin Baker (London: Arnold, 2003), 141.
20. Lev Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film: Writings by Lev Kuleshov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 195.
21. Baron and Carnicke, *Reframing Screen Performance*, 59.
22. David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
23. McDonald, "Why Study Film Acting?" 32.
24. Baron and Carnicke, *Reframing Screen Performance*; Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*.
25. Mary Ellen O'Brien, *Film Acting: The Techniques and History of Acting for the Camera* (New York: Arco, 1983), 144.
26. David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 121–23.
27. Ibid., 129–130.
28. Ibid., 134.
29. See Patrick Tucker, *Secrets of Screen Acting*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003).
30. *Batman: The Movie*, directed by Leslie Martinson (1966; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 2001), DVD.
31. Bob Garcia, "Batman: Making the Original Movie," *Cinefantastique* 24/25, no. 6/1 (1994): 57.
32. *Batman*, directed by Tim Burton (1989; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2005), DVD.
33. David Bordwell, "Superheroes for Sale," *Observations on Film Art*, last modified August 16, 2008, http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2008/08/16/superheroes-for-sale/.
34. Ray Tedman, *Heath Ledger: Living by Instinct* (London: Reynolds & Hearn, 2010), 106.
35. *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2008; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2008), DVD.
36. Travis Langley, *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2012), 23.
37. Baron and Carnicke, *Reframing Screen Performance*, 31.
38. Lampodikt, "BATMAN, THE MOVIE, 1966—West, Romero, & Meriwether Interview," accessed January 15, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9W_9zqaefM.
39. *Holy Batmania* (Image Entertainment, 2004), DVD.
40. Adam West, *Back to the Batcave* (New York: Berkley Books, 1994), 139–40.
41. Patrick McGilligan, *Jack's Life: A Biography of Jack Nicholson* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 90–91.
42. Ibid., 264–65.
43. Ibid., 52, 360.
44. Dennis McDougal, *Five Easy Decades: How Jack Nicholson Became the Biggest Movie Star in Modern Times* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008), 294.
45. Tim Burton, interview by Alan Jones, in *Tim Burton: Interviews*, edited by Kristian Fraga (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 26.
46. McDougal, *Five Easy Decades*, 295.
47. Ibid.
48. Brian Robb, *Heath Ledger: Hollywood's Dark Star* (London: Plexus Publishing, 2008), 10.
49. Ibid., 166.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 175.
52. Bordwell, "Superheroes for Sale."
53. Christopher Nolan, interview by Rebecca Murray, *About.com Hollywood Movies*, last modified July 4, 2008, http://movies.about.com/od/thedarkknight/a/darkknight70408.htm.

54. Richard Dyer, "*A Star Is Born* and the Construction of Authenticity," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, edited by Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), 137.

55. Chuck Dixon, "Known Super-Criminals Still At Large: Villainy in *Batman*," in *Gotham City 14 Miles: 14 Essays on Why the 1960s Batman TV Series Matters*, edited by Jim Beard (Edwardsville, IL: Sequart Research and Literacy Organization, 2010), 133.

56. Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, *Arkham Asylum* (New York: DC Comics, 1989); Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo, *Joker* (New York: DC Comics, 2008).

57. Roger Ebert, review of *Batman*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 23, 1989, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/batman-1989.

figure 3.1 the Joker, with large, rectangular teeth, from *The Long Halloween* #3, december 1997.

DOES THE JOKER HAVE SIX-INCH TEETH?

roy t. Cook

Introduction

The Joker, during the events shown in Jeff Loeb and Tim Sale's *Batman: The Long Halloween*,[1] is depicted as having six-inch teeth. In other stories, however, such as Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke*, he is depicted as having something much more like standard human dentition. On one level, this difference is clearly due to a difference in the artistic styles of Tim Sale and Brian Bolland. Nevertheless, there seems to be no *prima facie* reason why we cannot fairly ask which (if either) of these depictions accurately represents the appearance of the Joker within the fiction described by Batman comics. That is, we can meaningfully ask the question that forms the title of this essay: does the Joker have six-inch teeth?[2] The purpose of this essay is to determine whether this question has any sort of determinate answer, and, if so, how we, as readers, might discover what that answer is. The rewards of such an examination are twofold: attending carefully to puzzles regarding how the Joker is depicted in the Batman fiction can teach us much about how fictional truth functions and, conversely, these lessons regarding how fictional truth works then further inform our understanding of the Joker in important ways.

The argument will proceed as follows. First, I will present and refine the puzzle alluded to in the title of this essay—accounting for the different pictorial depictions of the Joker's appearance in different Batman comics. In this section, I also distinguish this puzzle from a number of simpler phenomenon and outline some rough criteria that a successful account must meet. I will then survey some simple, but ultimately inadequate, approaches, and I will further refine the shape that a successful solution must take. I then consider an alternative account of fictional truth—Kendall Walton's idea that fictions are games of make-believe—and use this account to formulate a solution to

the puzzle. Finally, I conclude by noting that aspects of Walton's make-believe account, combined with facts regarding the Joker established in Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*,[3] imply that we might, contrary to intuition, actually know very little about the Joker's appearance.[4]

The Joker's Teeth[5]

Before attempting to determine the length of the Joker's teeth (or addressing other, similar questions regarding how we can infer information about the appearance of fictional characters from the way they are depicted in comics), we first need to say a bit more about how pictures within comics provide the reader with information regarding the appearance of fictional characters, objects, and events described in the comics.

Comics are a pictorial narrative medium—the stories told within comics are presented to us (at least in part) visually via the artwork contained in the individual panels. As a result, at least some *fictional truths* are presented to us pictorially—for example, our only, or at least primary, means for knowing what the Joker *looks like* within the Batman fiction are the images contained in the comic. Since there is no other "independent" authority against which we evaluate these images for accuracy—in short, since the only evidence we have regarding the appearance of the Joker is his depiction within panels—there would seem to be good *prima facie* reasons for accepting the

> *Panel Transparency Thesis*: Characters, objects, events, and locations within the fictional world described by a comic appear, to characters within that fiction, as they are depicted within the panels of that comic.

In addition to its intuitive plausibility, there are additional reasons for taking the *Panel Transparency Thesis* seriously, including:

(1) The fact that characters in comics sometimes comment on the strange appearances of other characters; and,
(2) The fact that real-world costumes based on comic characters typically resemble the characters as they appear within the panels of the comic.[6]

Of course, these considerations fall far short of an unassailable argument for the *Panel Transparency Principle*, and this is as it should be. After all, the

f igure 3.2 t he Joker, with normal teeth, from *The Killing Joke*, March 1988.

construction of narratives within comics involves a delicate and complex balance of representational and stylistic modes, as is the case within any other narrative medium. Some content, including some pictorial content, is meant to accurately depict the appearance of characters and events within the story, while other content serves other narrative or artistic purposes.

For example, Garry Trudeau regularly portrayed Bill Clinton as a waffle within his *Doonesbury* comic strip.[7] Clearly, in this case, we are not meant to infer that Clinton, within the fiction described by Trudeau's strip, looks like a breakfast food. Instead, we are expected to recognize the double meaning of "waffle" and interpret this stylistic device as a non-literal, metaphorical comment on Clinton's tendency towards vacillation. Mistaking the waffle for an accurate depiction of Clinton's appearance within the fiction described by Trudeau's strips would be akin to misinterpreting speech or thought balloons as strange floating objects that appear next to a character whenever he or she speaks or thinks. In cases like this, the conventions governing storytelling within comics clearly indicate that the pictorial content in question should not be taken literally as a representation of the appearance of things that occur within the fiction.

With this in mind, the question at issue is not *whether* the *Panel Transparency Principle* holds, but *when* it holds. Thus, in the case at hand, we need to distinguish (as far as is possible) between those aspects of the pictorial content of panels that accurately represent the appearance of the Joker, and those that function in some other manner. The latter category will include (at least) those aspects of the artwork that function metaphorically (along the same lines as *Doonesbury*'s Clinton-waffle) and those aspects that function conventionally (such as thought and speech balloons).

Both metaphorical devices and conventional devices can be easily dealt with, however, by adopting a "default" reading of the *Panel Transparency Principle*—that is, by our understanding the principle to apply unless there are explicit or implicit signals to the contrary. There are other representational phenomena within comics, however, that cannot be dealt with simply by adopting a "default" reading. The Joker's teeth comprise one such example: As noted in the introduction, Jeff Loeb and Tim Sale's Joker in *Batman: The Long Halloween* is depicted as having six-inch teeth, whereas Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's Joker in *The Killing Joke* is depicted as having relatively normal teeth.

There seems to be no reason to think that these distinct pictorial representations of the Joker are meant to be metaphorical in the sense that Trudeau's Clinton-waffle is metaphorical (but see below). After all, there does not seem to be any substantial sense in which Loeb and Sale are implying that the Joker is getting old (playing on the idiom "long in the tooth"). Further, there exist no conventions within the comics art form generally that would signal that we are to take the length of the Joker's teeth nonliterally in either of these cases (other than very general conventions operating in fictional narratives preventing us from accepting contradictions such as "the Joker both does and does not have six-inch teeth"). Finally, unlike other cases of apparent contradiction within narratives, these depictions of the Joker's teeth do not seem to involve any sort of mistake. It is often noted that the location of Doctor Watson's (unique) war wound changes location from one Sherlock Holmes story to the next. This inconsistency, however, is clearly a mistake on the part of Conan Doyle, one that he likely would have corrected had he noticed it.[8] The incompatible depictions of the Joker's teeth, however, cannot be treated as a mistake of this sort, since it seems unlikely that Tim Sale would have been motivated to alter his art for *The Long Halloween* if someone had pointed out that it did not "match" the way that the Joker is depicted in *The Killing Joke*.

What the Joker's Teeth Are Not

So, how are we to navigate this apparent contradiction regarding the Joker's appearance? Two overly simplistic approaches, both based on an unreflective application of the *Panel Transparency Thesis*, can be rather quickly dispensed with. Both accounts accept, in some sense, all of the apparent pictorial data—that is, they accept that the Joker, during the events depicted by Sale, does have six-inch teeth, and also accept the apparently incompatible claim that the Joker, during the events depicted by Bolland, does not have six-inch teeth. Where they differ is in how they attempt to explain away the apparent contradiction.

With the first approach, both depictions of the Joker's dentition are accurate, but the Joker's appearance varies dramatically from one time to another (as does the appearance of many other Batman villains, including putatively human characters such as Two-Face). This option clearly flies in the face of common sense, and in addition merely replaces one difficult question with another: if characters within the Batman fiction regularly changed appearance in this manner, how would anyone in the Batman universe recognize anyone else from one point in time to the next?

The second, related suggestion is to interpret each distinct artistic style as depicting a different version of the Joker. On this interpretation, the Batman fiction is really a series of interrelated fictions: there is the Moore-Bolland fiction, describing the Moore-Bolland Joker (who looks like Bolland's drawings of the Joker), and there is the Loeb-Sale fiction, which describes the Loeb-Sale Joker (who looks like Sale's drawings of the Joker), and so on. This option, like the first, flies in the face of common sense—in particular, it violates the obvious fact that the Joker, in one publication, remembers events that occurred in other publications drawn by different artists.[9]

At the opposite extreme would be to deny that the *Panel Transparency Principle* ever applies to the images found in comics. Such an interpretation of the comic art form is suggested by Ole Frahm in an essay titled "Weird Signs: Comics as a Means of Parody," in which he writes that

> the reading of comics is precisely *not* about reconstructing unity (of whatever) but rather to appreciate the heterogeneous signs of script and image in their particular, material quality which cannot be made into a unity.[10]

Frahm's argument is complex, but the basic idea is that comics do not function narratively to describe a fictional world inhabited by characters such as

Batman and the Joker, or to indicate a dass of fictional truths regarding these characters, but instead serve as a parody of the very notion that signs (both pictorial and textual) could achieve such reference. I will not engage with the semiotic excesses of this account in full here, but will instead make two quick observations.

First, even if Frahm is right about the comics he considers in his article, his examples are atypical in being extremely and overtly metafictional. In *Old Doc Yak*, the landlord threatens to evict Old Doc Yak, pointing out that "the price of white paper is too high." *The Aliens* involves the aliens of the title entering an infinite regress via their discovering and reading a comic that depicts them discovering and reading a comic that depicts them... and so on *ad infinitum*. Finally, *Salut Deleuze!* depicts the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze crossing the river Lethe with Charon five times, directly engaging with Deleuze's own writings on repetition. As a result, while Frahm might be right about the failure of straightforward referentiality in these comics—that is, he might be right that questions about what is and is not true in these fictions makes little literal sense (and this is far from clear—after all, surely it is true that it is Deleuze, and not Derrida, that crosses the river five times)—the atypicality of these examples lends little weight to the claim that all comics function as parody in this manner.

In addition, applying this approach to the case at hand does not seem to do justice to the data. While denying that the Batman fiction has anything to say about the length of the Joker's teeth might solve the particular problem outlined above, by implying that *any* pictorial representation of the Joker, Batman, or Killer Croc is merely stylistic, this argument as a result fails to explain those (admittedly, very few) aspects of these character's pictorial depiction that are continuous from one installment of the Batman fiction to the next. Thus, a view that allowed for at least some fictional truths (even if it in the end rules that the length of the Joker's teeth is indeterminate) would be preferable. It is worth noting that the view suggested in the final section of this essay will involve the claim that there might be few if any fictional truths about the appearance of the Joker within the Batman fiction, but this claim will be specific to the Joker, and will not entail any similar indeterminacy with respect to the appearance of the Batman, Killer Croc, or other characters.

Finally, we might argue that the Loeb-Sale depiction is merely stylistic (and the Moore-Bolland depiction is not) based on the fact that the Joker appears more like an actual human being within the latter comic. Adopting such an approach amounts to adopting the following variant of the *Reality Principle for Fiction*:

> *Reality Principle*: A proposition *P* is true in a fiction *F* if and only if *F* is consistent with the core propositions of that fiction and, were it the case that the core propositions of *F* were true, then it would be the case that *P* is true.[11]

Setting aside the issue of how we determine which propositions constitute the "core propositions" of the Batman fiction, we can apply this principle as follows: first, it cannot be the case that the Joker both does and does not have six-inch teeth, hence the conjunction of these claims cannot be a core proposition of the fiction. Given that the Joker is (or at least was) human, however, it follows, in the absence of either proposition regarding the length of his teeth, that he would have something like normal human dentition. As a result, it follows that the Moore-Bolland depiction is accurate, and the Loeb-Sale depiction merely stylistic.

Unfortunately, this approach doesn't stand up to close scrutiny. Applying the *Reality Principle* in this manner amounts to adopting a methodology whereby, any time we are confronted with incompatible depictions of characters within the Batman universe (or any fictional universe), we opt for the depiction that most resembles how things look, or would look, within the actual world. Such a strategy ignores a distinctive feature of the Batman fiction: that it consistently treads a fine balance between the realism of the detective procedural (i.e., Batman as the world's greatest detective) and the phantasmagorical (i.e., Batman as archenemy of supernatural terrors such as Man-Bat and Killer Croc).[12] Regardless of how their appearances vary from storyline to storyline, we are clearly not meant to interpret Killer Croc as a normal dude with a (scaly green) skin condition. On the contrary, regardless of the "realism" of Batman's methods and milieu, Killer Croc is a genuine monster. Batman scholar Will Brooker traces this dual aspect of the Batman fiction back to the very first Batman stories:

> The villains of Batman's first year were, like Batman himself, an odd but effective hybrid of two cinematic modes which shared a visual style if not a cultural background: the Hollywood gangster cycle of the 1930s, and the German Expressionistic movement. Kane was a fan of *Little Caesar* and *Public Enemy*, and explicitly aimed for a "Warner Brothers look" in the early stories, even going so far as to include a Cagney lookalike in "Public Enemy #1," a story from *Batman* #4. . . . The fifth adventure, though, took a new slant entirely as Batman travelled first to Paris, then to Hungary, after a new villain called "The Monk." Not only did the Monk adopt a stylized costume like Batman—a red gown and hood—but his henchmen were werewolves, vampires, and a giant ape. For the first time, the uncanny seeped into Batman's

> previously realist adventures, and the rooftops of the city gave way to stilted trees against a looming moon, crooked castle turrets and gothic spires; a mise-en-scene far more reminiscent of *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* than of *Little Caesar*.[13]

This mixture of gritty urban realism and supernatural fantasy is as evident in contemporary Batman comics as it was in the comics Brooker cites. As a result, the Joker is particularly interesting with regard to the pictorial representation of characters within comics: just as the Batman fiction in general treads a delicate balance between realism and the fantastical, the Joker himself seems to be essentially both merely human and supernaturally other.

While there is no guarantee that the options discussed above are exhaustive—that is, there is no guarantee that these represent the only ways that we might understand the Batman fiction (and facts about the Joker's appearance within that fiction) in terms of an application of some version of the *Panel Transparency Principle*—it seems likely that any such approach will fall prey to similar difficulties. Thus, it would be helpful if there were some other approach to understanding how truth is created in fiction—especially in pictorial fictions such as comics. In the next section, I will formulate an alternative account of how we ought to interpret the strikingly different depictions of the Joker found throughout the Batman fiction.

Mimesis, Make-believe, and Multiple Personalities

In his influential *Mimesis as Make-believe*, Kendall Walton presents an alternative account of fictional truth involving three primary components.[14] First, narrative representations (including, of course, comics) are props in games of make-believe. Second, a prop is nothing more than an object whose function is to prescribe certain imaginings within a game of make-believe. Third, and finally, a proposition is fictionally true relative to a particular game of make-believe if and only if imagining that the proposition is true is prescribed by some prop in that game (regardless of whether the proposition is actually imagined in a particular playing of the game).[15] For example, in a game where children agree to imagine that each tree stump in the woods is a bear, the stumps are props, and it is fictionally true (in the game) that a bear is located wherever a tree stump (actually) exists. Similarly, in the game of make-believe whose rules are constituted by the conventions in play for interpreting comics, a particular instance of a Batman comic is a prop that requires us (by virtue of playing the game) to imagine those actions and events described by

the comic. The propositions we imagine to be true (assuming that we play the game properly) are thereby fictionally true.[16]

Of course, not everything pictorially depicted in a comic, understood as a prop in a game of make-believe, is prescribed in the relevant sense. Thus, a *Doonesbury* comic might require of us that we imagine Bill Clinton making certain pronouncements, but it neither requires us to imagine that he is a waffle nor to imagine round white objects to appear nearby whenever he makes such a pronouncement. In short, both metaphor and conventions regarding the comic form can and do trump the presumption that we should imagine the pictorial content of comics.

There is a further aspect of Walton's account that is essential to our interpretation of various depictions of the Joker's teeth. Walton argues that pictorial depictions work in a fundamentally different manner than do textual depictions. If, in a novel, we are told that "the Joker has six-inch teeth," then, given the conventions governing the reading-a-novel game of make-believe,[17] we are required to imagine that the Joker has six-inch teeth, and in addition we are often meant to imagine that we perceive the fact that he has six-inch teeth.[18] According to Walton, however, pictorial depiction involves an additional layer of imagination: when playing a game of make-believe prompted by such a prop, we are to imagine that the actions and events depicted in the picture occur, and we are to imagine that we are seeing them occur. But in addition, we are to imagine that our actual perceptions of the picture are our imagined perceptions of the events depicted in the fiction, and imagined by us. In other words, when experiencing a fiction that involves pictorial representation, such as a comics panel, we are not only to imagine that the events depicted in the representation occur, but we are also required to imagine that, when we (imagine that we) perceive them, that they appear to us as they appear in the panel.

As a result, the distinct pictorial depictions of the Joker's teeth in Moore and Bolland's *The Killing Joke* and Loeb and Sale's *The Long Halloween* are not, contrary to first appearances, in any tension. Moore and Bolland's take on the Joker requires merely that we imagine that the Joker shoots Barbara Gordon, and that these events appear to us as they are depicted in the panels of the comic. Similarly, Loeb and Sale's interpretation requires merely that we imagine that the Joker appears to us (but not necessarily to other fictional characters) as if he has six-inch teeth. We are not required, however, in either case to imagine that the Joker actually looks the way he is depicted in the panels. As a result, no contradiction arises: although the Joker cannot both have and not have six-inch teeth, there is nothing contradictory about imagining that

he *appears* to us one way during one story and that he *appears* to us another way during another story. Significantly, there is no guarantee that the Joker's actual appearance within the fiction depicted in Batman comics is the same as, or even similar to, how (we imagine that) he appears to us.

Note that this solution treads a fine line between a simplistic application of the *Panel Transparency Thesis*, where the pictorial content of panels provides us with straightforward information regarding the appearance of the Joker, and a Frahmian approach where panels provide no such information whatsoever. Instead, pictorial narrative, such as a panel in a comic, provides us with fictional truths regarding, not the Joker's actual appearance, but rather how he appears to us when we imagine that we see the events depicted in the comic. As already emphasized, there need not be identity between how (we imagine that) he appears to us and how he actually appears (when fictionally seen by the Batman, for example). Instead, the various ways that the Joker imaginatively appears to us in various Batman comics cue an inferential process by which we can deduce various fictional truths indirectly regarding his appearance. The importance of such indirect, inferential fictional truth is emphasized by Patrick Maynard in *Drawing Distinctions*, his masterful application of Walton's ideas to pictures:

> First, it is clear that what is depictively important about depictions is not only what they depict—that is, what things, situations, events and properties they get us to imagine seeing when we look at them—but how they depict them. . . . [Stylistic differences] literally affect our activities of seeing: first, seeing the drawings, since they affect the activities required to work up a relevant imagined seeing from the marks on the surface before us; second, our ways of conceiving the subjects depicted.[19]

Maynard's point, simply put, is that there is no sharp distinction between content (that part of the pictorial fiction meant to indicate fictional truths) and style (roughly, that part not relevant to fictional truth). On the contrary, since understanding the pictorial aspects of a pictorial fiction involves imagining that we see what is depicted in the picture and, further, that things appear to us as they appear in the picture, it follows that *how* things are depicted in the picture will affect our understanding of, and interpretation of, what is fictionally true in the story being told. In short, the fact that the Joker is depicted as having six-inch teeth in one story but not in another does not by itself imply either that he does or that he doesn't have six-inch teeth. His appearing to have six-inch teeth in the Loeb-Sale story (but not in the

Moore-Bolland story) does, however, affect how we understand the fictional events being depicted in these stories.

At this point it is worth emphasizing that the account just sketched can only be applied to apparently contradictory pictorial depictions, but not to apparently contradictory textual depictions. But this is as it should be. After all, as noted above, there is a relevant difference between the two sorts of case: contradictory textual descriptions, such as the location of Watson's war wound, in most cases strike us as mistakes. Similarly contradictory pictorial depictions, however, are not always, or even usually, mistakes, and hence they cry out for a different account—one that can do justice to these differing intuitions.

Walton's account of fictional truth, and especially of the particular sorts of imaginative activities involved in properly experiencing pictorial fictions, thus provides us with an elegant solution to the puzzle with which we began. Since we are not required to imagine that the Joker both does and does not have six-inch teeth merely by virtue of his being depicted in both these ways, but are merely prescribed to imagine that he appears to us as having six-inch teeth during some episodes, and to imagine that he appears to us as having normal teeth during other episodes, no contradiction ensues. In addition, this solution can be applied to any instance of apparently contradictory pictorial depictions (although it need not be applied to every instance, since we are free to interpret some pictorial contradictions as mistakes akin to Watson's war wound). Thus, we have answered at least part of our original question by explaining how we can interpret varying depictions of the Joker without attributing any incoherence to the narrative. The actual question that forms the title of this essay, however—namely, whether or not the Joker really does (fictionally) have six-inch teeth—remains to be answered.

The Joker's Teeth Redux

So does the Joker have six-inch teeth? If we adopt Walton's account of fiction as sketched in the previous section, then the answer to this question might lie in an in-depth examination of the various depictions of the Joker and the relationship between our imaginings (specifically, how we imagine that he appears to us when we imagine ourselves perceiving his various exploits) and his appearance (as seen by the Batman, for example) within the Batman fiction. I suspect that the answer is indeterminate—unlike other aspects of his appearance, such as the fact that he is slim (1980s cinematic depictions

notwithstanding)—a straightforward reading of the Batman fiction likely does not force one or the other dental interpretation on us.

There is another possibility, however, one that is worth briefly exploring. In the discussion above, we noted two obvious cases where it would be a mistake to take the pictorial content of a comics panel literally: when that content is clearly signaled as metaphorical (as in Trudeau's Clinton-waffle), and when that content is a conventional aspect of comics (such as motion lines or speech balloons). The reader will recall that during that discussion I parenthetically flagged the thought that the pictorial depictions of the Joker might be understood in this manner. Setting this interpretation aside until now was theoretically sound, since the account of apparent pictorial contradictions outlined in the previous section will have wide-ranging applications within comics regardless of whether it applies to the Joker's teeth. Nevertheless, there are reasons for taking seriously the idea that most or all aspects of the Joker's appearance within various installments of the Batman fiction are metaphorical.

These reasons can be found in Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*.[20] In this story, we learn from the psychologist at Arkham Asylum, the facility holding many of Batman's criminally insane nemeses, that

> unlike you and I, the Joker seems to have no control over the sensory information he's receiving from the outside world. He can only cope with the chaotic barrage of input by going with the flow. *That's* why some days he's a mischievous clown, others a psychopathic killer. He *has* no real personality. He *creates* himself each day. He sees himself as the Lord of Misrule, and the world as a theatre of the absurd.[21]

Thus, the Joker suffers from (among other things, obviously) an extreme form of multiple personality disorder, through which he creates a new personality for himself over and over again. This aspect of Morrison's story is clearly an attempt to provide some sort of rationalization of the Joker's (until now) rather vaguely defined psychosis, but it is also a rather effective retroactive explanation for the (frequently complained about) wild variations in the characterization of the Joker.

If we take this analysis of the Joker's personality seriously, then it opens up a new possibility for interpreting the various artistic styles used to depict the Joker. If the Joker's personality varies wildly from one storyline to the next, due to the constant reinvention of his personality, then perhaps we should interpret the similarly varied stylistic approaches to the Joker as

reflections of his different temperaments—that is, as different ways that we are meant to imagine that he appears to us (which, as noted before, need not imply that his appearance actually changes from one storyline to the next). It was suggested earlier that we ought not apply a metaphorical reading to aspects of pictorial narratives unless there existed some clear signal to do so. The suggestion, then, is that we take Morrison and McKean's story as just such a signal, suggesting that different pictorial depictions of the Joker are to be interpreted as metaphorical commentary on his different personalities. Thus, the comical six-inch teeth of the Loeb-Sale Joker in *The Long Halloween* are indicative of a lighthearted Joker personality in that story, while the rather more anatomically realistic Joker from Moore and Bolland's *The Killing Joke* represents (metaphorically) a more serious and more sadistic Joker.

If this is the right way (or, at least, one fruitful way)[22] to understand pictorial depictions of the Joker, then it follows that we in fact know almost nothing about the Joker's appearance. Other than a very few basic features that have remained constant throughout the past seventy years (such as light, although not necessarily white, skin), almost everything about his physical appearance in the panels can be taken metaphorically. If this is right, then the answer to the question, "Does the Joker have six-inch teeth?" is: who knows?

Notes

This essay has benefitted from feedback from, and conversations with, Frank Bramlett, Charles Hatfield, Patrick Maynard, Aaron Meskin, Christy Mag Uidhir, Stephen Nelson, Marcus Rossberg, Boris Smelov, Aaron Smuts, and Qiana Whitted.

1. Jeff Loeb and Tim Sale, *The Long Halloween* (New York: DC Comics, 2011).

2. It should be stressed that accepting the legitimacy of this question does not imply that we must accept that it has either a determinate yes-or-no answer!

3. Grant Morrison and David McKean, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (New York: DC Comics, 1997).

4. A word about terminology. I use the term "the Batman fiction" to refer to the single narrative work comprised of the comics series, miniseries, one-shots, and other publications taken to be canonical representations of the Batman and his fictional universe. I will not try to delineate exactly which individual publications do and do not fall into this category. The Batman fiction is clearly contained in the larger work referred to by fans as "DC continuity," and clearly contains those (non-imaginary, non-"Elseworlds") titles that contain "Batman," "Robin," and so on in the title. Throughout, I will assume (unless noted otherwise) that these publications constitute a single unified work of narrative fiction.

5. Understanding the problem at issue in terms of the *Panel Transparency Principle* was first explored in the penultimate section of Roy Cook, "Drawings of photographs in comics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70, no. 1 (2012): 129–38.

6. Needless to say, a distinction needs to be made here between costumes based on the characters as they appear in comics, and costumes based on characters as they appear in films or other non-comics media.

7. Garry Trudeau, *40: A Doonesbury Retrospective* (New York: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2011).

8. For an example of this sort of phenomenon within comics, consider the location of the star-shaped scar surrounding one of Cable's eyes in Rob Liefeld's depictions of the character (see Louise Simonson and Rob Liefeld, *X-Force: Cable and the New Mutants* [New York: Marvel Comics, 2011]).

9. There is a move that can assuage this last worry: perhaps there is a fictional "world" where the Joker looks like Sale's drawings, and another where the Joker looks like Bolland's drawings, but the exact same events occur within both fictional worlds (including all events depicted in both *The Killing Joke* and *The Long Halloween*). On this reading, we only "see" the Bolland Joker shoot Barbara Gordon, and merely infer that the Sale Joker shoots Gordon based on the fact that the Bolland Joker does. Such an approach would require that each new publication is (at least indirectly) telling a multitude of distinct stories, about a multitude of distinct Jokers, at the same time. While coherent, this approach seems more than a little metaphysically excessive, so we shall set it aside.

10. Ole Frahm, "Weird Signs: Comics as a Means of Parody," in *Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*, edited by Anne Magnussen and Hans Christiansen (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen Press, 2000), 177, emphasis in original.

11. For further discussion of the *Reality Principle* and related matters, see David Lewis, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), and Walton.

12. Thank to Boris Smelov for stressing this point in correspondence.

13. Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (New York: Continuum Press, 2000), 49–50.

14. Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

15. For more details, see Walton, chapter 1.

16. Walton suggests that the "basic" make-believe account might already solve at least some cases of apparent contradiction within fiction, writing that

> there can be prescriptions to imagine a contradiction even if doing so is not possible. (A badly drafted law might require one to do something and also refrain from doing it.) There may also be separate prescriptions to imagine P and to imagine not-P, without a prescription to imagine their conjunction. The set of propositions fictional in a given world might be inconsistent even if no contradiction is fictional. (65–66)

17. Of course, things are not so simple—issues regarding the reliability of narrators will interfere with any such simplistic account of fictional truth. Nevertheless, since these issues are less salient when considering pictorial fictions and, in particular, comics, I will ignore them here.

18. Note that imagining that we perceive that the Joker has six-inch teeth no more implies that we are in the same fictional "world" as the Joker than our perception of facts about characters on a movie screen implies that we are "inside" the world described by the film.

19. Patrick Maynard, *Drawing Distinctions: The Varieties of Graphic Expression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 220.

20. Of course, Morrison and McKean's *Arkham Asylum* is itself deeply saturated with metaphorical elements. Thus, the interpretation developed in this section depends, in part, on our understanding the metaphorical elements of Morrison and McKean's comic to extend beyond the confines of that story, to the Batman fiction as a whole.

21. Morrison and McKean, *Arkham Asylum*, 30.

22. After all, there need not be a single correct way to understand a particular fiction!

LADY HAHA

Performativity, Super-sanity, and the Mutability of Identity

eri C garneau

Born This Way?

In a screed against pop superstar Lady Gaga, noted culture critic Camille Paglia unleashed the following disparaging remarks about those who consume Gaga's music: "Everything is refracted for them through the media. They have been raised in a relativistic cultural vacuum where chronology and sequence as well as distinctions of value have been lost or jettisoned. . . . It is a world of blurred borderlines. . . . In the sprawling anarchy of the Web, the borderline between fact and fiction has melted away."[1] Instead of seeing this as a condemnation of what Paglia offhandedly calls "Generation Gaga," we might instead focus on a more widespread application of her assertion. It's not just Gaga fans who live in a blurry, relativistic morass where identity comes from assembling bits and pieces of refracted culture—it's all of us. And besides Gaga herself, few cultural objects are equipped to illustrate that point quite as eloquently as the Joker.

Throughout the character's seventy-plus years of existence on the printed page and television and movie screens, the Joker has confounded and fascinated both his archenemy Batman and those of us in the real world who read his adventures. Like any character who's been around for so long, his presentation and popular interpretations have changed seemingly with every new generation of fans. What makes the Joker so interesting, though, is that unlike other characters who possess his longevity—whose new iterations often have to clumsily maneuver around or outright ignore previous models—the Joker actually *thrives* on supposedly irreconcilable characterizations. More than any other popular comic book character, the Joker depends on having

a mutable identity, one full of "blurred borderlines" that ignore "chronology and sequence."

Indeed, it may be that Joker, Lady Gaga, and their devotees recognize something very important: that there is no such thing as fixed identity. Rather, our identity, such as it is, depends upon a continual process of construction. What pop-culture icons like Gaga and the Joker help us do, then, is illustrate that point in as tawdry a way as possible. Yes, it's unsubtle, but one typically doesn't look to pop art for subtlety—and besides, what fun would the Joker be if his sense of humor were understated?

A Slice of Philosophy

Before we engage too thoroughly with pop art, though, we ought to establish a bit of an academic background, starting with Michel Foucault, one of the key social theorists of the twentieth century. Much of Foucault's work centered on critiquing public institutions like psychiatry and the criminal justice system, which invariably led him to take on topics like power, knowledge, and identity.

In his deconstruction of numerous social structures, Foucault realized that personal identity is much more of a construction than an inborn facet of existence hoisted upon a subject at birth. As Swarthmore College professor Leslie Paul Thiele puts it in a 1990 article, to Foucault "humanity has no stable nature, no intrinsic identity waiting to be realized" (quoted in McGaha, para. 6).[2] Thiele goes on to say that Foucault has no use for norms and standards, which are essentially attempts by those in power to manufacture artificial order where none naturally exists. In other words, your real identity has nothing to do with what people may say you "should be." There's simply no such thing as "should be."

Groundbreaking feminist philosopher Judith Butler, heavily influenced by Foucault's work, would continue this line of thinking more seriously, especially by applying it to gender critique. In her 1990 essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Butler expands the idea of having no intrinsic identity to suggest that all gendered behavior is a performance. Centrally that essay argues that we are what we do, or, as Butler herself says, "One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one *does* one's body" (emphasis mine) (quoted in Felluga, para. 2).[3]

Though the word "performativity" has most frequently been used to articulate identity studies of non-white, non-straight, non-male individuals (it

has taken hold in queer theory too, for instance), there doesn't seem to be anything about the concept that bars it from applying to human beings on a larger scale. With that in mind, we've now set the stage to analyze the stars of our show, Lady Gaga and the Joker.

Why Gaga?

At face value, the connecting threads between Batman's greatest nemesis and one of the most famous pop stars of the modern era may seem slight. But besides the thematic connection we can draw between them vis-à-vis Paglia's essay, there are some striking aspects the two share. Most obviously, both the Joker and Gaga possess a love of the ostentatious—if something's not showy, it's not worth doing. This means that both embrace costumes, outrageous schemes, and essentially living as loudly as possible. Perhaps because of that, Joker and Gaga also both set the standard for the milieus in which they operate—few can strike against Gotham City without being compared to the Clown Prince, nor can they produce a pop record in 2012 without many critics imagining what Gaga would have done.

The Clown Prince of Crime Grows Up

Before we can get into a serious discussion of the Joker's shifting persona (we'll return to Gaga shortly), we'll summarize important aspects of this villain's rich history, highlighting some of his crucial crimes and, most important, defining the "stages" in which the Joker has operated.[5]

Killer Clown

As far as criminal introductions go, the Joker's first appearance in *Batman* #1[6] may not seem all that noteworthy. His goal is to steal a collection of rare and priceless artifacts throughout Gotham City, and to do so he threatens the wealthy people who possess them. What stands out a little more than that plot is his method of committing these crimes, which tends towards the byzantine—radio broadcasts, elaborate disguises, remote poisons, and his ever-present jester calling card. *Batman* #1 makes it clear that the Joker is a schemer whose attention to detail rivals even the titular hero's. He is also, in this iteration, a murderer who uses everything from his own Joker Toxin to

handguns to pull off his capers. Although his setups verge on the comical, the general tone of this book—like many Batman comics of the day—is one of darkness, with truly high stakes, at least as far as the lives of supporting cast members are concerned.

The Joker would carry on like this for several years; in fact, he actually appears again in a different story in *Batman* #1, up to his same tricks of threatening people over the radio, killing them, and stealing precious jewels. In his introductory essay for the *The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told* trade, then-DC Comics editor Mike Gold guesses that Joker was actually the first comics character to become "unkilled," endlessly appearing in stories after he'd been defeated and presumably had died, so much potential did Batman's creators see in him.[7] That notion becomes an important story point in 1942's *Detective Comics* #64, entitled "The Joker Walks the Last Mile," in which the Joker is literally executed and then revivified in order to begin a life of crime anew.[8] Again, in *The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told*, famed comic writer and trivia master Mark Waid postulates that that issue marked a significant turning point in the Joker's presentation; thereafter, the Joker came into line with the contemporary Batman books' softer, more youth-friendly direction (278–79).[9] It is after that story, perhaps, that Joker first became a clown.

Satire, Camp

Comic writer Grant Morrison would later refer to the stories resulting from "Last Mile"—all thirty-one years of them—as the Joker's "Satire" and "Camp" era.[10] It is during this period that readers get whimsical tales wherein the Joker seemingly tries anything and everything merely to best Batman, like 1952's "The Joker's Utility Belt," found in *Batman* #73,[11] where the Clown Prince designs his own answer to Batman's handy accessory that includes sneezing powder, Mexican jumping beans, and pellets that grow into snakes when they get wet. Another noteworthy story from this era is 1951's "The Joker's Crime Costumes" from *Batman* #63,[12] where our favorite villain, noticing how often Batman changes his outfit, masquerades as noted literary characters—Falstaff, Old King Cole—to pull off ludicrous robberies right under his victims' noses. This issue makes a perfect example of the connection between Joker and Lady Gaga, right down to the Joker's stunning fashion sense and tellingly fame-seeking internal monologue. In these stories, Joker typically doesn't kill anyone. His only goals are to make a big scene and maybe make Batman smile. The more outlandish his plot is, the better. For over three decades, camp is king in the Joker's world; he truly lives up to his name.

New Homicidal

Returning t o M ark W aid's *The Greatest Joker S tories Ever Told* ess ay f or in - spiration (and Morrison for a category name), we can see the Joker undergo another transformation in an iconic 1973 story entitled "The Joker's Five-Way

HA HA HA
HA HA HA

Revenge."[13] Here, under editor Julius Schwartz, writer Denny O'Neil, and penciler Neal Adams, Batman's adventures reclaim the noir edge they'd lost so long ago. In this story, cribbing a card from *Batman* #1, the Joker marks five victims for death; this time, they're previous associates of his that he wants out of the picture. He leaves them cold with a smile, and he leaves his card at the murder scene to let Batman know he's back to his old tricks. Both for the life-and-death implications of its plot (which climaxes in a shackled Batman battling a shark—not so much funny as intense) and the incredibly realistic, detailed artwork of Adams, "Five-Way Revenge" brings a seriousness to Joker stories that earlier efforts by Finger, Kane, and Robinson had hinted at.

Then came the 1980s, and with them a wave of hyper-"realistic," hyper-violent superhero tales. At the forefront of that movement is Frank Miller's 1986 *The Dark Knight Returns*, a book that presents a grossly degenerate, somewhat sexualized, and dystopian version of the Joker.[14] Given what happens to the Clown Prince in the following years, Miller seems to have opened a few floodgates over on the regular monthly Batman titles. 1988 saw the release of Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's landmark *The Killing Joke*, in which our favorite clown—who finally gets something of a fleshed-out origin, though its dependability is suspect—breaks out of jail, cripples Barbara Gordon (seemingly permanently) and attempts to turn her father (the commissioner) insane.[15] This is a darkly psychotic, serious look at how far the Joker character might go when taken to an extreme, playing up both the ridiculous (he wears a Hawaiian shirt and shorts while committing crimes; he's—maybe—a failed stand-up comedian) and the psychopathic (he assaults Barbara Gordon and takes pictures that are meant to infuriate her father). *The Killing Joke* marks the first in a chain of stories that really push the character into darkness; less than a year later, DC published *A Death in the Family*, which culminates in the Joker gruesomely murdering Jason Todd, Batman's new Robin, by beating him with a crowbar and then blowing him up.[16] In less than twelve months, the Joker had decimated Bruce Wayne's support circle, leaving readers to wonder what he would do next.

A Serious Joker on a Serious Earth

Again, not even a year after the last landmark Joker story, DC Comics released possibly the most definitive text in the character's history (although we'll discuss one that could better claim that title shortly). In October 1989, breakout comics writer Grant Morrison and experimental art-school star Dave McKean unleashed on the world *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, a hit

graphic novel that takes a deeply psychological approach to the Dark Knight and his colorful cast of villains.[17] In *Arkham*, Batman essentially descends into Hell. If we can rightly call him Dante, then the Joker is his Virgil (though he's a bit more combative than the Roman poet). The Joker mostly serves here to move the plot along, save for a few brief snippets of information about the character—given in the form of a psychological diagnosis by a doctor, Ruth Adams—that offer an entirely new perspective on the clown:

> In fact, we're not even sure if he can be properly defined as insane. . . . We're beginning to think it may be a neurological disorder, similar to Tourette's syndrome. It's quite possible we may actually be looking at some kind of super-sanity here. A brilliant new modification of human perception. More suited to urban life at the end of the twentieth century.
>
> Unlike you and I, the Joker seems to have no control over the sensory information he's receiving from the outside world.[18] He can only cope with that chaotic barrage of input by going with the flow. That's why some days he's a mischievous clown, others a psychopathic killer. He has no real personality. He creates himself each day. He sees himself as the Lord of misrule, and the world as a theatre of the absurd. (40–41)

Here, in a few pages, Morrison irrevocably challenges our conception of the Joker. Suddenly, a reason exists for his seemingly random changes between the decades. We no longer have to resort to pedantic "real world" factors like changing readership or editorial tastes to explain away why his character doesn't exhibit consistency—now that lack of center is built into his very essence. With any other character, this may seem like authorial laziness,[19] but for a character like the Clown Prince, it only adds to his fascinating identity.

The lack of consistency Morrison champions is on full display in *Arkham*. Here we see a version of the Joker unlike one we've ever met before. For instance, this one is hyper-sexualized, with hints of transvestism. He wears high heels and dons a long black leather trench coat, popular symbols of BDSM (bondage and discipline/dominance and submission) erotic culture. Additionally, everything he says to Batman oozes sexual energy; note that Joker refers to the Dark Knight as "honey pie," "darling," "dearest," "tight ass" (with a bum slap), and "sweetheart" (twice) (on pp. 33, 52, 113, 33, 20, 52, respectively). He also uses purposefully provocative language to goad Batman into playing along with his plot, like asking if Robin has started shaving (remember, this is right after he murdered Jason Todd) (33). This time, the Joker's scheme has nothing to do with murders, thefts, or clowning around. Rather, it seems his goal here is to toy with Batman in more cerebral ways.

CHEER UP, HONEY PIE!
LISTEN: HOW MANY BATTLE SCARS? WHERE IT HURTS...
SHUT UP.
OOOH! IT TICKLES MR. J TOM, ARE WE?
TAKE YOUR FILTHY HANDS OFF ME!
WHAT'S THE MATTER HAVE I STRUCK A NERVE?
FILTHY DEGENERATE!
YOU'RE IN THE REAL WORLD NOW AND REAL LUNATICS HAVE TAKEN OVER THE ASYLUM.

f igure 4.2 t he Joker's sexual provocativeness is on full display in this page from Morrison and Mck ean's *Arkham Asylum.*

Had Morrison gotten his way, the Joker's appearance in *Arkham Asylum* would h ave b een e ven m ore tr ansgressive. In th e en dnotes f or 200 4's fifteenth anniversary edition of the book, he states that Joker was to have been dressed in M adonna's famous outfit from her "Open Your Heart" video, but DC C omics w ouldn't all ow i t (141). Later, in his p art-history/part-memoir *Supergods*, Morrison explains further: "Warner Bros. objected to my portrayal o n th e grounds th at i t w ould en courage th e w idespread b elief th at J ack Nicholson, the feted actor lined up to play the Joker in an upcoming $40 million Batman movie, was a transvestite."[20] From this we can see a more direct instance o f J oker b eing c onnected t o an i conic p op star, th e M aterial Girl, whose own ties to Lady Gaga have been much discussed.

Most important to our discussion of *Arkham Asylum*, Morrison here does more than unify all of Joker's past appearances—he actually sets forth a new concept to explain them away, the idea of *super-sanity*. Unfortunately, *Arkham* doesn't pay too much more attention to this n otion straightaway, although another endnote in the fifteenth anniversary edition does give us this tidbit from Morrison (149): "The idea of the Joker's 'super-sanity' haunted me for years and eventually developed into my theories of multiple personality complexes as the next stage in human consciousness development." This seed of an idea finally blossoms in Morrison's next work on the Joker.

The Clown at Midnight

After 1989, the Joker became a c haracter ripe for reinterpretation, whether it was in th e hands of th e aforementioned Jack Nicholson, Mark Hamill (in *Batman: The Animated Series*), or the numerous comic writers and artists who left their mark on the Clown Prince. Surely, for those growing up during that period, it is one or more of those conceptions of the Joker that resonates the most. But the next truly revolutionary move for the Joker would, unsurprisingly, come again from Morrison himself.

As central as *Arkham Asylum* is to our understanding of the character, Morrison had another c ard up his s leeve, s o to speak. We know from his a bove comments that the concept of "super-sanity" he'd only briefly mentioned in *Arkham* stayed with him, twisting and turning in his b rain and becoming an idea worth serious consideration. When Morrison took over writing *Batman* in 2006, the time was finally right to air that idea out in April 2007's *Batman* #663, "The Clown at Midnight." Finally, in this story, an illustrated prose novella more than a traditional comic, Morrison is free to explore the implications of having a character who can literally rebirth himself (let us remember

what Mike Gold and Mark Waid have said about Joker's ability to come back to life), and we get to bear witness to the Joker as he transitions himself from one phase to the other. In ess ence, this is th e story readers miss ed b efore "Five-Way R evenge." "The C lown at M idnight" is ar guably th e m ost c rucial text for understanding the Joker across all his different iterations.

When dis cussing "Clown at Midnight," "birth" is th e key word. So much of M orrison's p rose—lathered o n thi ck in this f aux-noir tal e—directly r eferences the conception of life. "It's time to peel himself from his d ead skin like a snake," Joker thinks. "The new sound of himself is coming through like a frequency." The process is "a disturbing can-can of contraction, labor, and birth," and is akin to "a showgirl delivering a donkey on stage." Perhaps most startlingly, we learn that "multiple Joker voices vie for control as he prepares to give blasphemous birth to himself like the word of God in reverse" (22).

But *why* does Joker do this? Why does his "super-sanity," or his "series of superpersonas," as Batman refers to them earlier in the issue (17), manifest this way? For that, we turn to Joker's internal narration:

> He tries to remember how the doctors in Arkham say he has no Self,[21] and maybe they're right, or maybe just guessing. Maybe he is a new human mutation, bred of slimy industrial waters, spawned in a world of bright carcinogens and acid rains. Maybe he is the model for 21st-century big-time multiplex man, shuffling selves like a croupier deals cards, to buffer the shocks and work some alchemy that might just turn the lead of tragedy and horror into the fierce, chaotic gold of the laughter of the damned. Maybe he is special, and not just a gruesomely scarred, mentally-ill man addicted to an endless cycle of self-annihilating violence. Stranger things have happened. (22)

Given th e i dea in troduced in *Arkham A sylum* th at e very J oker st ory, e ven those with vastly different tones, all "really" happened, th ose ar e arguably the m ost imp ortant w ords w ritten a bout th e c haracter in all o f comics. At least one person very important to the Joker took this t ext very seriously: Heath Ledger.

Ledger's Turn in The Dark Knight

A year af ter "The C lown at M idnight," film audiences an d comic b ook f ans everywhere b ecame privy to likely the most striking take on the Joker of this g eneration. F or m any c ritics an d v iewers, H eath L edger's tur n a s th e character in C hristopher N olan's 2008 *The Dark Knight*[22] is n othing short of

spellbinding. Ledger completely disappears into his role, becoming for many easily the most compelling element of the film. And it seems that, in large part, Ledger got his inspiration from Grant Morrison.

Shortly after *The Dark Knight* premiered, MTV's comic-centric blog *The Splash Page* published a brief article on Ledger's performance, noting that he kept a "Joker diary" to get into the character's head.[23] In that diary is a list of things that would make the Joker laugh, such as landmines, sombreros, and AIDS (para. 2). That very same list is seen in the above-mentioned "Clown at Midnight" and further includes items like shattered faith, politics, and brunch (16). Thus, we can begin to see the influence of "Clown at Midnight" on one of the most celebrated takes on the Joker of all time. Indeed, with just a little looking we can spot how thoroughly Morrison's emphasis on Joker's mutable identity pervades this film.

The key is in the Joker's ever-shifting origin stories, which always start with the same line: "Wanna know how I got these scars?" What at first might appear to be a play for sympathy on the part of Ledger's Joker just further adds to his enigma. We may initially accept it when he tells the gangster Gamble that his drunken father cut his face into a permanent smile; we may even feel bad, which is almost definitely what Joker wants. How betrayed do we later feel, then, when Joker tells Rachel Dawes that he cut himself to make his disfigured wife feel better, only to have her leave him? Besides the scars, though, other elements in *Dark Knight* tell us that Joker is a character that cannot be nailed down. This is apparent even from the first shot in which he appears, where we see him, back to the audience, standing on a street corner with a clown mask in his hand. He comes on screen as though out of nowhere; he could be anybody (it's also worth noting that twice in this movie he disguises himself despite already wearing a costume—once when he dons a clown mask and once when he puts on "normal person" makeup). In fact, *everything* about Nolan's Joker, from his actions to Ledger's performance, is impossible to read. The film's script, written by Nolan and his brother, Jonathan, incorporates various Joker tropes from across his publication history—he makes outrageous, timed demands that threaten murder using mass media; leaves Joker cards on victims; creates elaborate traps; has ludicrous vehicles ("slaughter is the best medicine"); does things just for fun; and wants to kill a city in the process. He dresses like a clown, a cop, and a nurse. It's as though every important Joker story ever told collides in this screenplay.

Ledger's performance meets that bricolage head-on; there are points when he acts goofy and childlike (bounding away from an exploding hospital), and others where he's absolutely terrifying. His taped interrogation of a Batman

impersonator probably best combines these moods; he goes from cackling about the foolishness of a Batman in hockey pads to a very serious threat on the lives of Gotham's top elected officials in a matter of seconds. It seems, pardon the pun, insane that Ledger can run through so many divergent emotions so quickly. But then, what are the best actors if not individuals who can change their identities at will?

If we're meant to take one thing away from *The Dark Knight*'s Joker, it's that sometimes order and rationality just can't hold. Foucault would probably like the Joker, whose whole mission in this film is to challenge the establishment just because. He's perfectly anarchic but also a master schemer. He's also not wrong. Consider that at the end of *The Dark Knight*, Batman decides to take the blame for five murders committed by Harvey Dent, the Joker's pet project. Gotham can't see Dent as a killer, Batman argues; they need their perfect image of him. Batman, however, is strong enough to survive such a perception. Therefore, much as the Joker changes his identity in this film to fit the situation, so too does Batman at its end, at least as far as the rest of the world is concerned. Has he perhaps taken the Joker's lesson to heart? Should we all?

What We Can Learn from the Joker and Gaga

What is so important about what Joker has to teach us? And how does Lady Gaga help illustrate that message? First, let's be clear: this is not a call to put yourself through a rebirthing process so you can become a killer clown.[24] But that doesn't mean there isn't some lesson we can take away from the Joker's continual process of rebirth, even if he is a monstrous criminal. The lesson is this: if identity is not fixed—if you can recreate yourself at will—*you can be whatever you want*. Recall Judith Butler's concept of performativity: identity is nothing but a set of rehearsed practices. Though Butler (like Foucault before her) generally sees these practices as more of a subconscious recitation of appropriated behavior, it may be that when reality becomes more fractured—as both Paglia and Morrison touch on—we can more consciously pick and choose which practices to incorporate into our being, a veritable buffet of identity choices.

For Lady Gaga, it seems the artist herself is well aware of this implication in her persona. In a February 2011 interview with *Vogue* magazine—only a few months before the release of her *Born This Way* record—writer Jonathan Van Meter asks her about her relationship with her fans, which prompts

this answer full of "messianic zeal":[25] "I want for people in the universe, my fans and otherwise, to essentially use me as an escape. I am the jester to the kingdom. I am the route *out*. I am the excuse to explore your identity" (para. 19). In choosing to use the word "jester" to describe her role, it seems Gaga could not have been more helpful to this essay. Additionally, the imagery in Gaga's "Born This Way" music video perfectly complements the message of the song's "express yourself" vibe;[26] it's nothing but a continual procession of birth and rebirth visuals, of Gaga "trying out" different identities (one of which, it should be said, is not completely un-Joker-like).

Even the scholarship surrounding Lady Gaga puts the question of her obscured and chameleonic identity front and center. In Richard J. Gray II's volume, *The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga: Critical Essays*, the introduction makes this notion plain: "Lady Gaga *is* performance."[27] Contributor Ann T. Torrusio explores this idea fantastically in her essay "The Fame Monster: The Monstrous Construction of Lady Gaga," where her very thesis statement—"because Lady Gaga is a complete fabrication, she has the freedom to constantly reinvent her image"—acts as something of a companion to this essay).[28] Torrusio calls this process "monstering" (a label we might apply to the villainous Clown Prince), and she goes on to explain:

> Lady Gaga presents herself as a modern shape shifter, morphing into myriad variations of herself while presenting all the variations as possibly the "true" construction of Lady Gaga . . . her constant shape shifting provides her viewers the opportunity to catch glimpses of themselves. (160–61)

Throughout Torrusio's essay, she explains how Gaga's ever-shifting apparent identity allows her to manipulate her fame in such a way that she helps her audience construct their own identities, allowing and even encouraging them to be whoever they want, even if some of those audience members choose to mirror Gaga in very literal and uncreative ways.

A final note on Lady Gaga's relevance here may come from a surprising source. In a recent interview with the blog Mindless Ones, the above-cited Grant Morrison fields a question about whether or not superheroes could actually exist, and this exchange results:[29]

> Grant: They're very individualistic in the sense of how they project themselves. . . . It's like Lady Gaga who only exists to help people.
>
> Bobsy: She's created a space for the dispossessed on this . . . *massive* scale, which no previous pop star's been able to do.

Grant : It needs someone to do it. . . . Although I don't like the music, it's great that she's allowed weirdos back in the disco.

Bo Bsy: It's a shame to think that the forerunners of superheroes on Earth might be vacuous celebrities, but it's quite easy to look at her and go: she's got a super-power, hasn't she?

Grant : And also, you've got to remember that a lot of these vacuous celebrities are helping people. All those celebrities that we mock for being "vacuous" are actually doing much more to help the planet than we are. What the fuck have I ever done? Bono actually goes out there, and he scrapes up the soil and he plants seed into it. These people are actually acting like superheroes. We might actually be closer to superheroes than you think.

In other words, Lady Gaga exemplifies the possibility of real-life superheroes. That's quite a tur naround from the opening critique of Camille Paglia, who bemoaned Gaga and her fans for existing in an identity-less vacuum. Maybe that identity-less vacuum is the point. The Joker, it should be said, has tried to jettison all context from his existence—"Remember? Ohh, I wouldn't do that! Remembering's dangerous. I find the past such a worrying, anxious place" (Moore and Bolland 2006, 278). If Gaga fans really do live in a vacuum, maybe that's to their advantage.

But, of course, nobody actually lives in a v acuum. Even Paglia's remarks seem to recognize this; just because information and culture are "refracted through the media" does not mean they are absent. In fact, Joker and Gaga themselves illustrate perhaps the most compelling response to living in an era where we're presented with *too much* information. Morrison, remember, stresses that Joker is especially equipped to live in modern times. Could it be that in our fast-paced, media-saturated world of "blurred borderlines" where the "barrier between fact and fiction has melted," we're in a better position than ever to be the people we want to be? We face so many sensory inputs every day that we can't help but have a tremendous freedom of choice, more than any generation prior, to incorporate what we want into ourselves. It's not all that crazy, then, for Grant Morrison to talk about superheroes actually existing. They may heretofore have been a product of fiction, but that matters less and less every day.

In summation, both the Joker and Lady Gaga lead us to a conscious recognition that identity is constructed and performed. No matter how hard you dissect her lyrics or videos, you'll never pinpoint the "real" Gaga—there's simply no such thing; she's whatever she makes herself. Similarly, no matter how closely you watch *The Dark Knight*, you'll never find the man behind

Joker's greasepaint; he erased that identity long ago. And rather than that being some condemnation of humanity, one might argue that this recognition actually allows us to embrace humanity in a more meaningful sense. We can be whatever we want. To quote another identity-bending musician, we can be heroes. It just took us a clown to show us the way.

Notes

1. Camille Paglia, "Lady Gaga and the Death of Sex," *Shakenstir*, last modified September 12, 2010, http://www.shakenstir.co.uk/index.php/features/gaga-and-the-death-of-%20sex/features/20608/.

2. Scott McGaha, "Michael Foucault," *Criminological Theory*, last modified Fall 2000, https://www.criminology.fsu.edu/crimtheory/foucault.htm.

3. Dino Felluga, "II: On Performativity," *Introduction to Theories of Gender and Sex*, last modified January 31, 2011, http://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/genderandsex/modules/butlerperformativity.html.

4. If you're wondering what Camille Paglia thinks about Judith Butler, well, it's not pretty. Paglia had this to say in a 2005 interview with the blog *Bookslut*: "Judith Butler, she pretends to be a philosopher out there, but she's not recognized in philosophy, her knowledge of anything . . . her background in anything is absolutely minimal . . . her work is utterly pernicious, a total dead-end" (Daniel Nester, "An Interview with Camille Paglia," *Bookslut*, last modified April 2005, http://www.bookslut.com/features/2005_04_005030.php, para. 23.)

5. For this discussion, DC Comics' sadly out-of-print trade paperback *The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told* will be an especially helpful reference, although we'll look outside its covers for further examples when necessary.

6. Jerry Robinson, Bill Finger, and Bob Kane, "Batman vs. the Joker," in *The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told* (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 11–23 (originally published in *Batman* #1, Spring 1940).

7. Mike Gold, "The Joker's Dozen," in *The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told*, 6–10.

8. Bill Finger and Bob Kane, "The Joker Walks the Last Mile," *Detective Comics* (New York: DC Comics, 1942), n.p.

9. Mark Waid, "Stacking the Deck: The *Other* Joker Stories," in *The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told*, 278–83 (see note 6).

10. Grant Morrison and John Van Fleet, "The Clown at Midnight," *Batman* (New York: DC Comics, 2007), n.p.

11. Dick Sprang and Charles Paris, "The Joker's Utility Belt," in *The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told*, 76–87 (originally published in *Batman* #73, October–November 1952).

12. Dick Sprang and Charles Paris, "The Joker's Crime Costumes," in *The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told*, 64–75 (originally published in *Batman* #63, February–March 1951).

13. Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams, "The Joker's Five-Way Revenge," in *The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told*, 165–87 (originally published in *Batman* #251, September 1973).

14. Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns Tenth Anniversary Edition* (New York: DC Comics, 1996), n.p.

15. Alan Moore, Brian Bolland, and John Higgins, "Batman: The Killing Joke," in *DC Universe: The Stories of Alan Moore* (New York: DC Comics, 2006), 258–303 (originally published in *Batman: The Killing Joke*, March 1988).

16. Jim Starlin, Jim Aparo, and Mike DeCarlo, *Batman: A Death in the Family* (New York: DC Comics, 2011), n.p

17. Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, *Batman: Arkham Asylum 15th Anniversary Edition* (New York: DC Comics, 2004), n.p.

18. This language certainly recalls Paglia's critique of Gaga.

19. When Morrison began writing *Batman* in 2006, he attempted to apply the same philosophy to the titular hero in a slightly different way—all of the absurd sci-fi/comedy Batman stories from the '50s and '60s were written off as results of exposure to Joker Toxin, Scarecrow's fear gas, or a week-long sensory deprivation experiment he voluntarily took part in to, in fact, figure out how the Joker thinks.

20. Grant Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011).

21. This language is practically identical to our discussion of Foucault at this essay's beginning.

22. *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2008; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2008), DVD.

23. Jennifer Vineyard, "'Arkham Asylum' Scribe Grant Morrison Opens Up Heath Ledger's Joker Diary," *MTV Splash Page*, last modified April 8, 2008, http://splashpage.mtv.com/2008/08/04/arkham-asylum-scribe-grant-morrison-opens-up-heath-ledgers-joker-diary/.

24. It seems that the *Dark Knight Rises* Aurora tragedy cannot be ignored. Let's just say that James Holmes seems to have not understood much about the Joker's actual character.

25. Jonathan Van Meter, "Lady Gaga; Our Lady of Pop," *Vogue*, last modified February 10, 2011, http://www.vogue.com/magazine/article/lady-gaga-our-lady-of-pop/#1.

26. *Born This Way* (video), directed by Nick Knight, 2011, accessed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wV1FrqwZyKw.

27. Richard J. Gray II, "Introduction," in *The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga*, edited by Richard J. Gray II (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2012), 3–17.

28. Ann T. Torrusio, "The Fame Monster: The Monstrous Construction of Lady Gaga," in *The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga*, 160–72.

29. Adam, "Grant Morrison Supergods interview transcript," *Mindless Ones*, last modified June 30, 2011, http://mindlessones.com/2011/06/30/grant-morrison-supergods-interview-transcript/.

EPISODES OF MADNESS

Representations of the Joker in Television and Animation

david ray carter

At the climax of *Batman: The Killing Joke*, the Joker attempts to persuade Batman to view life as he does: as a dark joke played at humanity's expense.[1] In the story, the villain explains how he went—or rather chose to become—insane: "Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another; if I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice!"[2] *The Killing Joke* offers one version of the Joker's origin story, but in true "multiple choice" style, alternate views of that same story appear in *Batman: The Man Who Laughs* and *Detective Comics* #168, and in the films *Batman* and *The Dark Knight*. Unlike the origin of his nemesis Batman, the origin of the Joker is malleable and constantly evolving; no one version can be considered definitive.

The same could be said for the character of the Joker himself. Throughout the years, the Joker has run the gamut of villainy, at times being depicted as a comic trickster, a master criminal, and a psychopathic killer. Some versions have seen him embody all three personas simultaneously. Like his origin, the Joker's *modus operandi* has varied to match the prevailing style of comic narratives of the period, to fit the ongoing narratives of the Batman franchise, and, often, to push the boundaries of what was permitted in comic books. Therefore, it should come as little surprise that when surveying the depictions of the Joker in other media, many variations are present, ranging from those that are faithful to the comics to those that present a wholly unique version of the character.

Representing the Joker in another medium—be it movies, television, or animation—is problematic. Just as the Joker's distinctive visual depiction is ingrained in minds of fans, so are the facts that he is criminally insane and has been responsible for some of the most horrific acts in the history of comic books, many of which are important milestones in the DC Comics

universe. Throughout the course of his more than seventy years, the Joker has been most often shown to be a remorseless psychopath, capable of any crime, from robbery to attempted genocide. On top of the countless violent crimes he's committed, the Joker is also responsible for two of the most important events of the Post-*Crisis* DC universe. In 1988 and 1989, the Joker shot and paralyzed Barbara Gordon/Batgirl in *Batman: The Killing Joke* and killed the then-current Robin, Jason Todd, in the *Death in the Family* storyline. As shocking as these events were, neither of these acts could be considered as out of character for the Joker. On the contrary, his penchant for violence and mayhem were facets of his character that contributed to him being the most important and popular villain in comics. Therefore, an expectation exists that any "faithful" translation of the Joker into other media would need to be equally violent and murderous, and thus a truly formidable foe for Batman.

Murder, poisoning, and disfigurement are images seldom seen in network television programming or animated series aimed at children. Bringing the Joker into one of these two formats comes with some daunting obstacles. It is, however, not impossible, and, indeed, it has been in television and cartoons that the Joker has made the most appearances outside of comic books. It is my argument that in classifying the Joker only in terms of the horrific nature of his crimes, one ignores the aspects of the character that make him so fascinating. Certainly, it would have been possible for the Penguin to shoot Barbara Gordon, for Two-Face to kill Jason Todd, or for Mr. Freeze, Killer Croc, Bane, or any member of Batman's gallery of rogues to serve as the perpetual thorn in his side for decades. The Joker's continuing popularity has not been solely based on the violent acts he's committed against Batman and the DC universe. What is most fascinating about the Joker—and far more important for a genuine understanding of the character—is the question of *why* he has done these things. This is where television and animation have an advantage over cinema and even comic books. As we will see, the more horrific the acts the Joker is allowed to commit in media, the farther from the true essence of the character the depiction becomes.

The question of the Joker's propensity for murder is a constant specter hanging over the Batman universe, as it seems to indicate that Batman is incapable of stopping him. "Why doesn't Batman just kill the Joker?" asks Mark D. White,[3] correctly pointing out the countless lives that would potentially be saved in a Joker-less world. Batman's culpability for the Joker's crimes is a frequent topic of discussion in the limited amount of scholarship on the characters, in Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, and in the comics themselves.

This question is an ethical quandary that inevitably leads to Batman and the Joker being reduced to ciphers in a hypothetical moral question, and thus the subtle nuances of each character are overlooked. Television and animated depictions of the nemeses deftly avoid becoming mired in such discussions by removing the Joker's proclivity for homicide, allowing the many facets of the Joker's character to be fully explored.

If we are to assert that television and animation provide a more authentic depiction of the Joker than other media, we must first determine what constitutes the "real" Joker. Given that he has been different things in different hands, this is no easy task. There are a myriad of different "Jokers" seen in the comics, yet there are three facets of the character that are evident in any depiction of him: the criminal, the clownish, and the cerebral. Even in his earliest incarnations, the Joker has been shown to be a master criminal with an exceptionally shrewd mind. The Joker's criminal activities are guided only by his own warped logic and typically employ a misdirection technique of some kind, often rendering Gotham's police and even Batman unable to determine when and where he will strike. Though largely ignored in the face of his more heinous acts, the comic book Joker has been more successful at committing the "petty" crimes of supervillainy—bank robberies and jewel heists, for example—than any of his Gotham City peers.

Never removed from any of his activities are the clownish aspects of his persona; the incessant laughter and constant stream of time-worn jokes that serve to amuse only himself. The clownish aspect of the Joker dictates the performative nature of his crimes, all of which are designed to be spectacles and criminal works of art. This is key to understanding the Joker's motivations. Unlike other criminals, he is not motivated by a desire for wealth or revenge, but by a need for attention, specifically Batman's attention. The Batman-Joker dynamic is part of the latter's cerebral dimension as well. The Joker's activities are designed with his relationship with Batman in mind, so that there are two levels to what he does: the superficial function of the crime, and then the degree to which it furthers his ongoing battle with Batman, a conflict in which the Joker places primacy on continuance rather than victory. Thus, the Joker sees his struggle against Batman as something greater that just that of order versus chaos, and through this we can observe, though not fully understand, why the Joker prefers to continue this battle indefinitely.

Batman would make his first appearances in other media in Columbia Pictures' fifteen-chapter serial *The Batman*[4] and again in their 1949 serial *Batman & Robin*.[5] Each of the two serials featured an original villain (Dr. Daka and the Wizard, respectively), despite the fact that, by 1943, Batman's gallery of

villains was already filled with the likes of Two-Face, the Penguin, the Scarecrow, and Catwoman. Batman's colorful villains would not accompany him into other media until the 1966–68 ABC television series *Batman*, during which the Joker made his first appearance outside of the comic books. The Joker would be the third villain introduced in the series, coming after the Riddler and the Penguin, in the two-part episode, "The Joker is Wild/Batman is Riled,"[6] based on 1952's *Batman* #73 but also incorporating elements of the Joker's first appearance in *Batman* #1. The television Joker was portrayed by Cesar Romero, in a performance that heavily emphasized the criminal and comedic aspects of the character, although to a lesser extent the cerebral is also present. The *Batman* series has been derided by some as overly campy, although intentionally so,[7] and Romero's version of the Joker has received similar criticism, especially in light of the subsequent highly praised live-action cinematic portrayals of the character by Jack Nicholson and Heath Ledger. Peter Sanderson, comics scholar and archivist for both DC Comics and Marvel, describes Romero's Joker as "comparatively tame" and "thoroughly dated," stating that Frank Gorshin's Riddler and Burgess Meredith's Penguin appear to be more formidable foes for the television Dynamic Duo.[8]

Taken by themselves, however, the *Batman* episodes featuring Romero's Joker are very much in keeping with his comic counterpart, both the then-contemporary criminal trickster and latter incarnations where the Joker proved to be a more violent foe for Batman. The majority of the series' cliffhanger episodes end with the villain attempting to murder Batman and/or Robin, and thus the Joker's murderous designs did not distinguish him from his fellow villains in this regard. It is in how he relates to Batman that we best see the more fascinating, cerebral aspects of the Joker's character. For the Riddler, Mr. Freeze, King Tut, and the rest of *Batman*'s villains, Batman is a nuisance; his presence disrupts their carefully crafted plans. *Batman*'s Joker designs his schemes to gain Batman's attention, however, planning his crimes with Batman as his central audience. This is best seen in "The Joker Trumps an Ace/Batman Sets the Pace,"[9] an adaptation of 1949's *Batman* #53. The Joker plots to steal $500,000, but the money is secondary; his primary goal is to publicly embarrass Batman. The Joker's overwhelming psychological need for Batman's opposition is pronounced in every comic version of the character, and in this regard, *Batman*'s Joker emerges as both accurately representing the character and even presaging later interpretations.

Romero's portrayal of the Joker would influence the animated versions of the character that followed in the years after the end of *Batman*. The first animated version of the Joker would appear in the 1968 and 1969 CBS Filmation

series, *The Batman/Superman Hour*. The Batman portions of the episodes would later be repackaged as *The Adventures of Batman* and again as *Batman with Robin, the Boy Wonder*, and were part of a large number of DC properties brought to television by Filmation and CBS between 1966 and 1969, beginning with *The Superman/Aquaman Hour of Adventure*, which featured appearances by Flash, Green Lantern, and the Teen Titans. ABC's live-action *Batman* became progressively more detached from its comic origins in its second and third seasons, but *The Adventures of Batman* represented a complete break from the source material.[10] Thus, the Joker on display in the series only has a superficial resemblance to his comic counterpart, specifically his visual appearance, his constant laughter, and the occasional use of puns. Here, the Joker is virtually indistinguishable from Batman's other foes, posing no more threat than Catwoman, the Penguin, or even "Simon the Pieman," a villain created for the show who actually defeated five of Batman's villains by himself, the Joker included.

The Joker of *The Adventures of Batman* was also indistinguishable from any number of villains on non-superhero Saturday morning cartoons such as *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?* The abandonment of the comic source material was a defining characteristic of the DC/Filmation efforts, a sharp contrast to the relatively faithful Marvel Comics properties from the same time period, such as *Fantastic Four* and *Spider-Man*.[11] Since both the Joker and Batman were reduced to formulaic cartoon characters, it was fitting that the next time the archenemies faced one another in animated form it would be as part of Hanna-Barbera's *The New Scooby-Doo Movies* for CBS in 1972. Batman and Robin were the "special guest stars" of two episodes, a distinction they held with real-life celebrities such as Sandy Duncan, "Mama" Cass Elliot, and the Harlem Globetrotters. The fact that they were pitted against the Joker and the Penguin in each episode is evidence of the Joker's prominence in Batman's gallery of rogues. As with Joker's team-ups with other villains in the comics, he dominates the pairing, with the Penguin effectively acting as his assistant. Again, the Joker bears a closer resemblance to the foes typically associated with *Scooby-Doo* than he does to the calculating maniac of the comics.

Batman would next appear briefly in a Filmation animated series in 1977 known as *The New Adventures of Batman*.[12] Though only one season was produced, the show would air regularly until 1981 under the names *The Batman/Tarzan Adventure Hour* and *Tarzan and the Super 7* on CBS, and again on NBC as *Batman and the Super 7*. The Joker makes the most appearances of any of Batman's villains in the sixteen-episode series and is largely true to his comic

nature despite the fact that *The New Adventures of Batman* is the most overtly campy of any of the Batman adaptations, taking cues from the live-action *Batman* and adding additional comic relief in the form of inter-dimensional prankster Bat-Mite. That the Joker of *The New Adventures of Batman* is a more faithful version of the character than seen in *The Adventures of Batman* is most evident in the premiere episode, "The Pest,"[13] wherein the Joker steals an experimental car. The Joker displays both his clownish and criminal sides in the episode, taunting Batman and the police by announcing the time and nature of his crime in advance. Though his plan succeeds largely through the bungling of Bat-Mite, it is evident that the Joker is a formidable criminal mind, particularly when compared to later series foes Sweet Tooth, Professor Bubbles, and Moonman, all created by Filmation specifically for the series. An intelligent, sinister Joker would have his final solo appearance in the series in "He Who Laughs Last"[14] before uncharacteristically appearing as part of several villain team-ups.

Batman, as the Joker's nemesis, would have a prominent role in the various iterations of Hanna-Barbera's *Super Friends* animated franchise, which aired on ABC under various titles from 1973 to 1986. The series featured a pared-down version of the Justice League of America, and the heroes faced very few villains from the comics until 1978–79's *Challenge of the Super Friends* pitted them against the Legion of Doom. The Joker is conspicuous by his absence from the group, as the rights to the character were owned by Filmation at the time, and Batman's villains, the Riddler and the Scarecrow, appear in his place. Although Filmation's claim to the Joker was presumably over by that time, the Joker was even omitted from the later *The Super Powers Team: Galactic Guardians* versions of the franchise, despite playing a pivotal role in both the comic and action figures of the same name. The Joker only appears in 1985's "The Wild Cards"[15] as part of the Royal Flush Gang, a villain group with whom the Joker had no previous association in the comics and had actually battled against in the sixth issue of his mini-series. This version of the Joker is at odds with his traditional depiction, as he is shown as being subservient to Darkseid, and appears to be "the Joker" in name only.

Batman and the Joker resumed their regular roles in comic books after the conclusion of the final season of *Super Friends/Super Powers* in 1986, and they would appear in comics exclusively until 1989. That year would mark the debut of Tim Burton's theatrical film, *Batman*, in which Jack Nicholson portrayed the role of the Joker. The unprecedented success of both the film and Nicholson's performance revived interest in the Joker, who, for the first time, was depicted in a manner that accurately showed the many facets of his

character. Nicholson's Joker benefitted from a PG-13 rating, meaning that he could maim and murder at the same level as his comic counterpart. The same would not be true for the next animated incarnation of the character in *Batman: The Animated Series* (*Batman: TAS*), airing on Fox from 1992 to 1995.

Batman: TAS was afforded more leeway than other animated series of the period, such as being allowed to use guns, something forbidden on other Fox superhero series (such as *Spider-Man: The Animated Series*).[16] However, it was still bound by far more restrictions than both the comics on which it was based and Burton's film, and murder and graphic violence remained prohibited despite the series' more "mature" tone. The biggest impact would be upon Batman's most recognizable foe, the Joker, who by 1992 was rarely depicted in the comics as anything less than a mass murderer. Although the Joker had committed violent crimes in his first appearance in *Batman* #1 and resumed his murderous ways in 1973 with O'Neil and Adams's *Batman* #251 ("The Joker's Five Way Revenge"), his depictions in television and animation had been based primarily on the Silver Age version of the character: a devious, but ultimately harmless, criminal clown. *Batman: TAS* would mark the first time that what is considered the "true" version of the character was depicted in other media, and is perhaps most faithful version of the character to date.

Voiced by Mark Hamill, the Joker of *Batman: TAS* is at once menacing and mirthful. The series' characterization of the villain captures all facets of his personality to a far greater degree than any previous televised or animated version and, arguably, even more so than some comic interpretations. The success of the interpretation is due in large part to the series' ability to balance the criminal, clownish, and cerebral aspects of the character without letting any single element overshadow the others; it is a balanced version of the Joker. This is a Joker who makes bad puns while attempting to poison all of Gotham City to distract from a series of robberies. The Joker's villainy is neither mitigated to be more palatable, nor is it played up for shock value. Here, the Joker is a mixture of Bob Kane, Bill Finger, and Jerry Robinson's original madman, Cesar Romero's campy scene-stealer, and the ruthless criminal the Joker became in the hands of writers like Alan Moore, Denny O'Neil, and Steve Englehart.

The Joker's first *Batman: TAS* appearance would come in the seventh episode of the series. Unlike Mr. Freeze and Clayface, who debuted prior to him, Joker would not be given an "origin story" episode or even be shown squaring off against Batman. "Joker's Favor"[17] is a unique episode in the series, but one that is a fitting introduction to the more subtle aspects of the character often omitted from other interpretations. The Joker turns a minor incident

of "road rage" into an excuse to stalk and harass a mild-mannered Gothamite for two years, later forcing the man to help him in a plot to murder James Gordon. "Joker's Favor" is short on superhero action—Batman only appears briefly—but goes very far to demonstrate the depths of the Joker's insanity and his skewed sense of humor while still depicting him as a very serious threat to the world at large. Furthermore, the episode demonstrates the importance of spectacle, rather than criminal success, to the Joker, which is the primary factor that separates him from Batman's other foes in the series.

The episode "The Last Laugh"[18] is a more traditional Joker story. Joker floods Gotham with laughing gas to allow him to go on an unin terrupted crime spree. Though the gas itself is non-lethal, the events of the episode strongly imply that the citizens are in mortal peril due to its effects. "Christmas with the Joker"[19] features a nod to the character's first appearance in *Batman* #1 with the Joker hijacking the airwaves to announce the timing of his crimes. Though he is unsuccessful, this episode depicts the Joker going on a murderous rampage that would rival his comic exploits. He kidnaps and threatens to murder Commissioner Gordon, Detective Bullock, and broadcaster Summer Gleason, attacks Batman and Robin with machine guns and a cannon, and attempts to destroy a passenger train by blowing up a bridge. The conclusion sees the Joker safely in his cell in Arkham Asylum, but the episode clearly shows him as both willing and capable of mass murder, a trait that was not afforded the other villains shown in the series. The idea that the Joker was capable of destroying all of Gotham would appear in several other episodes, notably "Harlequinade,"[20] which sees the Joker stealing a bomb and threatening to destroy the city. His failure at such murderous designs does not indicate a more innocuous version of the character, but instead should be seen as evidence that the Joker places a greater importance on his war with Batman than on wanton violence.

A large number of *Batman: TAS* episodes were either inspired by or direct adaptations of the comics, something unprecedented for a superhero animated series. Many of these adaptations involved the Joker, beginning with those in the second half of the first season, first aired in 1993. The first such episode was "The Laughing Fish,"[21] a combination of three of the Joker's most iconic comic appearances from the seventies: "The Joker's Five Way Revenge" from *Batman* #251, "The Laughing Fish" from *Detective Comics* #475, and "Sign of the Joker!" from the issue following. Each of the three stories has the Joker committing multiple murders, yet their absence here does not diminish the episode, allowing instead for a greater emphasis on the Batman/Joker dynamic rather than focusing on the crimes.

Though not a part of the stories referenced in the episode, the Joker seemingly perishes at the conclusion of "The Laughing Fish"—a frequent occurrence in the comics which inevitably resulted in his reappearance at a later point—but the episode marked the first time it would occur in animation. The Joker would also appear in 1993's animated feature *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm*,[22], a loose adaptation of the *Batman: Year Two* story arc from *Detective Comics* #575–578,with the Joker providing an additional threat.

The Joker would not be the primary villain of an episode again until "Harlequinade," the final episode of the second season. As *Batman: TAS* progressed, the Joker made fewer appearances with his last being in 1994's "Make 'em Laugh,"[23] which incorporates *Batman: The Killing Joke*'s origin of the character as a failed stand-up comedian prior to his transformation into the Joker. The Joker returned in 1997 after the series changed networks from Fox to the WB Network and was rebranded *The New Batman Adventures (TNBA)*. Many of the characters were visually redesigned for the move, the Joker included, but the character continued to be voiced by Mark Hamill. The Joker remained equally murderous in this new incarnation, as evidenced in the series' opener "Holiday Knights,"[24] in which the Joker attempts to murder a crowd of revelers on New Year's Eve. For his next appearance, the series adapted one of the earliest comic narratives it would present, 1952's "Joker's Millions" from *Detective Comics* #180. Since there was no need to change the Joker's behavior from that of his Golden Age counterpart, it is among the series' most faithful adaptations.

TNBA would conclude with an episode that provided far greater insight into the Joker's character than any of his previous depictions in other media: the Paul Dini and Bruce Timm-scripted "Mad Love,"[25] a faithful adaptation of their Eisner Award winning one-shot of the same name. "Mad Love" is essentially an origin story for Harley Quinn (Joker's "hench-wench," to use the series' terminology), who was introduced in *Batman: TAS* and later added to the DC Comics continuum. The story's premise is that the Joker's obsession with Batman arouses jealousy in Quinn, who then reasons that only by eliminating Batman can she finally have a romantic relationship with the Joker. Quinn's flashbacks regarding her first encounter with the Joker eloquently display the fact that his insanity belies his cunning; he immediately sees in the new Arkham Asylum intern someone who he can easily manipulate for his own gain. After she helps him escape, the Joker has no use for Quinn, and that she does not realize this is the defining aspect of their relationship on the series. The climax of the episode sees the Joker free Batman from Harley's trap, firstly because he wants to be the one to kill Batman, and secondly

because he deems her method as not amusing enough to be a fitting end for the Caped Crusader. Going further, he attempts to murder her because, like Batman, she does not really understand him, illustrating that there is a very particular method to the Joker's madness, one so unique that even another insane person is unable to understand it. Although he is afforded less screen time than Quinn, "Mad Love" explores every facet of the Joker's persona in depth, from his obsession with Batman to his ready willingness to murder the only person who loves him.

During the run of *TNBA*, the Joker made "guest" appearances in other DC Animated Universe (DCAU) series, and his characterization was consistent with his appearances in *Batman: TAS* and *TNBA*. He first teamed up with Lex Luthor for a trilogy of episodes on *Superman: The Animated Series*, entitled "World's Finest" and later released on home video as *The Batman/Superman Movie: World's Finest*.[26] The storyline follows those in the comics of the same name closely, with Batman and Superman teaming to fight the combined villainy of the Joker and Luthor, who has grossly underestimated the depths of his new partner's insanity. After a single-episode appearance in the 2000–2004 WB series, *Static Shock*, the Joker appeared as part of the Injustice Gang for Cartoon Network's 2001–2004 *Justice League* series, and then again inexplicably teamed with the Royal Flush Gang for the episode "Wild Cards."[27] The most unique vision of the character was presented in *Batman Beyond: Return of the Joker*,[28] which sees a deceased Joker return to life forty years later via a microchip implanted with his personality embedded in the former Robin, Tim Drake. Again, the depiction of the character is in keeping with his appearances in *Batman: TAS*, and the film's narrative is perhaps the best example of the Joker's unending obsession with Batman.

After these brief but memorable appearances, a much different-looking Joker would appear in *The Batman*, a 2004–2008 series airing on the WB Network's "Kids WB." *The Batman* took place outside the continuity established by the DCAU, *Batman: TAS*, and the Batman comics, depicting a young Batman at the beginning of his crime-fighting career. This departure was too jarring for some fans, many of whom panned the show. An example of the criticisms leveled against the show is seen in a Crave Online article on superhero animated series, where writer Iann Robinson ranked *The Batman* as the fifth worst superhero cartoon of all time, calling it "unwatchable."[29] The Joker's depiction in the series was singled out for ire as well, with Robinson echoing the sentiment of many fans who objected to the redesign of the iconic character, who was missing his trademark purple suit, looked almost non-human, and displayed a variety of kung-fu skills in addition to his deadly comic gags.

Despite the physical differences of *The Batman*'s Joker, it is still essentially the same character. Although he is now able to hold his own against Batman in physical confrontations, the Joker is still largely a cerebral villain, and his crimes are primarily typified by their theatricality and designed with Batman in mind. There are times in the series where the Joker's depiction is even more faithful to his comic counterpart than those seen in previous incarnations. This is best seen in the first half of the two-part season one finale, "The Rubberface of Comedy/The Clayface of Tragedy."[33] "The Rubberface of Comedy" is a loose adaptation of *Batman: The Killing Joke*—the first, and to date only, attempt to translate that story into another medium—and the Joker's depiction in the episode is largely in keeping with that seen in the comic. The Joker made several appearances throughout the course of the series, and though the storylines diverged far from the comic source material, the character of the Joker continued to be depicted in a manner consistent with his origins.

Also taking place outside of the DCAU continuity was Cartoon Network's 2008–2011 series *Batman: The Brave and the Bold (Batman: BAB)*. Utilizing the team-up format of the comic of the same name, the series featured Batman partnering with various DC superheroes to foil villains' schemes and adopted a much lighter, humorous tone than previous superhero animated series. A distinguishing characteristic of *Batman: BAB* was its use of a wide-range of DC characters, some of whom were obscure and previously unseen in other media. Therefore, Batman's usual gallery of rogues (including the Riddler, Catwoman, and the Penguin) made only a handful of appearances, but even with competition from the extraterrestrial threats and would-be world conquerors featured in the series, the Joker again emerged as Batman's most dangerous foe. *Batman: BAB*'s Joker was patterned after the version of the character from the 1950s, and most of the crimes he commits are of the clownish variety, such as launching a giant pie at Batman in "Triumvirate of Terror!"[31] This Joker is incredibly faithful to the incarnation of the period from which it was adapted; therefore, the fact that he is more comical than homicidal speaks to the depiction's accuracy rather than a change made to fit the format.

A significantly more murderous version of the Joker appeared in 2010's direct-to-video film, *Batman: Under the Red Hood*.[32] Adapted by writer Judd Winick from his run on the *Batman* comic, *Under the Red Hood* features Batman squaring off against the new Red Hood, the former Robin, Jason Todd. The film begins with a variation of the *A Death in the Family* storyline, showing the Joker supposedly murdering Todd after being hired by Ra's al Ghoul to distract Batman from his European operations. In the present day, Todd,

as the Red Hood, is upsetting Black Mask's illegal drug and weapons trade, forcing Black Mask to free the Joker from Arkham Asylum to assist him in defeating the Red Hood. *Under the Red Hood* makes some substantial changes to the comic's storyline, expanding the role of the Joker significantly, but doing so in a manner that is not consistent with traditional methods of depicting the character. The Joker is shown to essentially be a hired hand to Ra's al Ghoul and Black Mask, both of whom find him impossible to control. This is at odds with the accepted version of the character, and it seems unlikely that the Joker would acquiesce to being an accomplice for either villain, even temporarily.

Furthermore, *Under the Red Hood*'s Joker lacks the theatrical aspects of the character, and Winick depicts the Joker's insanity as being purely homicidal. This is perhaps due to the format of the work. Being direct-to-video and rated PG-13, *Under the Red Hood* was afforded far more leeway to show the Joker committing murder than previous animated incarnations. In doing this, other aspects of the character—such as his obsession with Batman and his affinity for spectacle—are lost in favor of showing him committing violent crimes, often without purpose or, to use the Joker's terminology, a punch line. *Under the Red Hood* concludes with a standoff between Batman and Todd, where the latter forces Batman to explain his reasons for not killing the Joker. Their exchange introduces a degree of tedium to an otherwise exciting scenario, reiterating the idea that other animated depictions of the Joker are more successful by not addressing this issue.

In the over seventy years since he was introduced, the Joker of the comics has gone through a variety of phases, from a harmless but felonious prankster to a grinning mass murderer. The forty-five-plus years of Joker adaptations in television and animation have run a similar gamut of characterizations, with the qualification that the darker aspects of his character were often avoided due to content restrictions placed on the respective formats. As demonstrated by *Under the Red Hood*, the animated feature bound by the fewest restrictions of any of the Joker's ventures in the medium, the inclusion of these darker aspects leads to a version of the character that is less recognizable than those in his more restricted forays. The Joker of *Batman: TAS* killed no one during its run yet is considered to be among the most authentic versions of the character to date—called "a perfect adaption"[33] and "[one of] the best Jokers of all time"[34] by online authors—because of the series' focus on the clownish, criminal, and cerebral in equal measure. The content restrictions of the televised and animated formats force writers to reinvent the character in a similar manner, to explore every facet of the character and

not simply the body count left in his wake, and this has given rise to the most accurate depictions of the Joker in any medium.

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15. "The Wild Cards," *The Super Powers Team: Galactic Guardians*, directed by Ray Patterson (1985; Los Angeles, CA: ABC, 1985), Television.
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18. "The Last Laugh," *Batman: The Animated Series*, directed by Kevin Altieri (1992; Los Angeles, CA: Fox, 1992), Television.
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II

THE JOKER AND THE POLITICAL

figure 6.1 a still shot from *The Dark Knight* (Christopher nolan, 2008), featuring the Joker after he harasses a hospitalized medical patient, and immediately prior to detonating the hospital.

THE OBAMA-JOKER

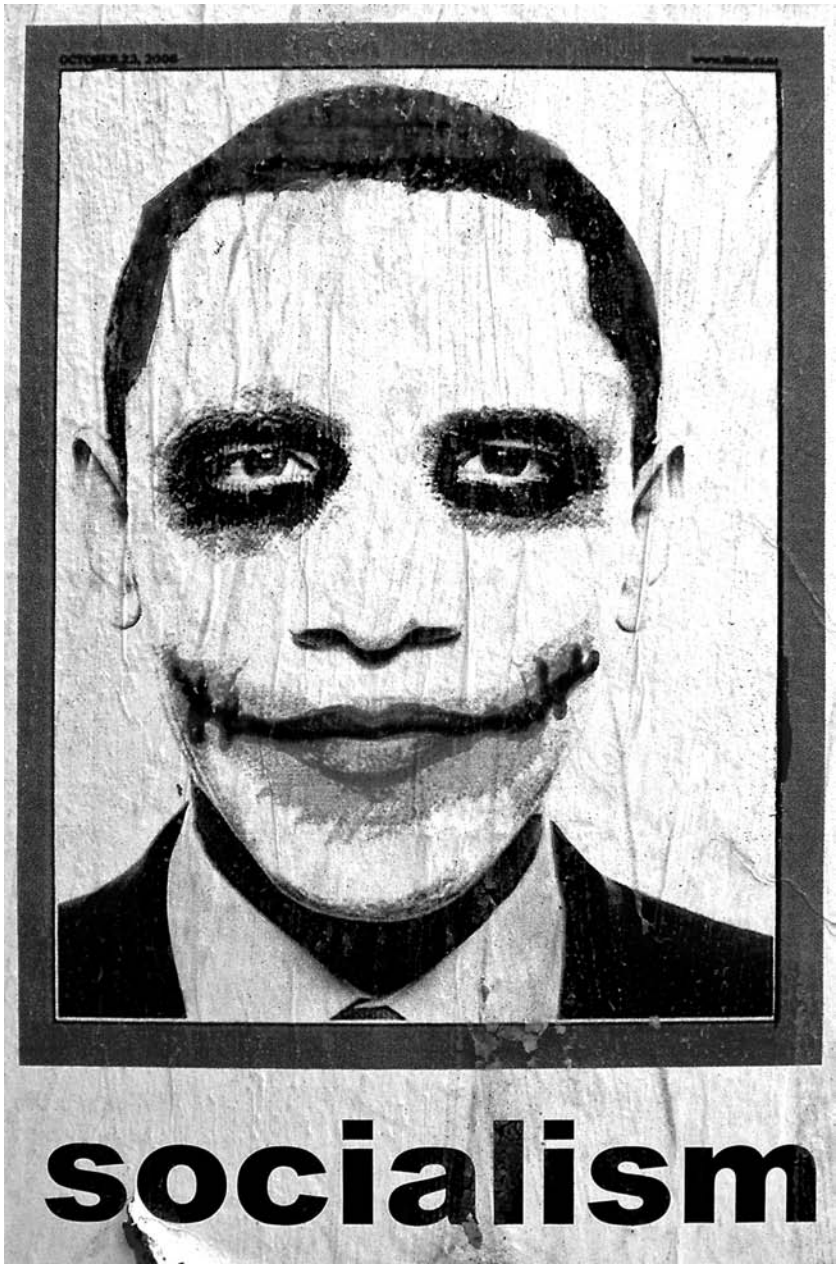
Assembling a Populist Monster

eManuelle We SSel S and Mark Mar tinez

Introduction

In *The Dark Knight* (*TDK*), the Joker harasses a hospitalized patient while cross-dressed as a female nurse. After using his disguise to sneak into the hospitalized Harvey Dent's room, the Joker-Nurse proclaims a desire to "upset the established order." After this episode, the Joker detonates the entire hospital.[1]

Fast forward to the summer of 2009. A populist U.S. social and political movement assembling under the name the Tea Party Patriots garners headlines for their passionate and theatrical protests of President Barack Obama's healthcare reform initiative.[2] One character became the star of this show, appearing on numerous signs, posters, and websites: the Obama-Joker. Using software such as Adobe Photoshop, creators of these images modified Obama's visage to resemble Heath Ledger's Joker.[3] Creating an uncanny synergy between politics and popular culture, the Obama-Joker in its many forms deploys a tangle of symbols that collide to create an arresting, affective visual image. In this essay, we explore, inspired by a merging of psychoanalytic theory and assemblage theory, the social and political stakes of the circulation of this image—part popular culture, part political protest. We argue that a significant cultural shift (i.e., the Joker's new persona) should be mapped alongside political discourse involving popular response to Obama. Beyond the politics of the image itself, we argue that a crucial aspect of the Obama-Joker's visibility and circulation is the extent to which its existence is supported and enabled by user-friendly media technologies. It is not only the image that deserves attention, but the digital technologies responsible for its production and circulation.



f igure 6.2 o ne of the original, and perhaps the most widely circulated, o bama-Joker images, credited to f iras a lkhateeb.

In a behind-the-scenes interview on *TDK*'s Blu-ray, director Christopher Nolan defines the film's aesthetic, and dominant logic, as that of gritty realism. The project's experiment in realism involved taking iconic characters and stories from the Batman comics and placing them in the world in a way that resonates with a contemporary audience.[4] *TDK* has received serious journalistic attention for what it might reflect of a U.S. political system and economy in turmoil for at least a decade.[5] The flight from the fantastic to the realistic in our entertainment demands our drawing connections to "real" life, and *TDK* in particular tells an American story of trauma and cautiousness. For example, the film presents us with a confounding, terrifying villain. The distinct horror of the Joker is tied to his utter inhumanity and otherness: he lacks not only morals or values; he is ultimately bereft of a core sense of self. Throughout the film, this is demonstrated by his duplicitous nature, literal and figurative "trying on" of costumes and personae, and unpredictable mood swings. The collective imagination of post-9/11 America that has in one way or another, lost its innocence, in turn, demands realistic portrayals of icons.

In this sense, what is crucial to the power of *TDK* as an allegory for our American story is how we imagine and respond to the figure of horror that the hero must face. How was the Joker, Batman's archenemy since 1940, translated from his lineage of fantastical generalities—as an evil court jester, the "clown prince of thieves," and the "harlequin of hate"—into a "real" picture of horror? When this character of entertainment becomes "real," are there "real" world consequences?

The reality of *TDK*'s moment dictated that the Joker would not be a materialistic thief, as he had been in his first 1940 appearance. Likewise, this Joker would not take on the whimsical dementia of an urbane and dandyish clown as in Cesar Romero's and later Jack Nicholson's portrayals. This Joker would not even resemble the sadistic murderer who took utter pleasure in killing Batman's sidekick Robin.[6] Instead, *TDK*'s Joker was summed up in ways that portrayed him as realistically evil in a way that would resonate deeply with American audiences: he was a *terrorist* and *anti-capitalist*. Suddenly, the "terrorist" of Gotham, as *TDK*'s Harvey Dent named him, who the Dark Knight's faithful butler Alfred claimed wasn't "looking for anything logical, like money," emerged as a symbol of the political fears of a nation attacked on its own soil—one embroiled in a never ending war on terror, whose financial markets and capitalist way of life were seemingly a shambles. Finally, what emerged along with this new Joker in 2008 was the prospect for an unprecedented presidential election result. The first Black president, Barack Obama, would later push for universal healthcare, an initiative that was feared by many, as

we will see, to be a federal redistribution of wealth in America. It is from these profound shifts that an image of the Joker as terrorist exceeded the film and entered both political discourse and the popular imagination. The moment that Firas Alkhateeb created and circulated a photograph of Obama with the Joker's makeup superimposed, a familiar dilemma in Batman's history—to kill or not kill the Joker—took on immense political stakes.

Affect and Abjection Assembled: Media Technologies Structuring Feeling

We use a cultural reading of Jacques Lacan's[7] and Slavoj Zizek's[8] analyses of affect and abjection to explore Obama-Joker as a cultural and material expression of intense affect towards the U.S. president as monstrous other. We believe that the works of these theorists are crucial, insofar as they offer a nuanced and thoughtful understanding of both the experience of horror, and how an experience of visceral horror can get enmeshed with political ideology. For Lacan, arresting affect comes when the subject is shocked or jolted by something that they cannot easily categorize within the preexisting confines of the symbolic order. There are no words for such an experience—the Real is terrifying, disturbing, and profound.[9] It is utterly Other. As Julia Kristeva has discussed, such an experience is often processed by the subject as abject, a feeling defined by a comingling of revulsion and curiosity.[10] For Zizek, this type of experience can culminate in the construction of monstrous others. This happens when the subject puts a sociopolitical narrative around what he objects to, creating something that he identifies against, a bad other who legitimates his own subjectivity.[11] Obama-Joker, an image evocative of both an evilness that is profoundly Other and political dissatisfaction, is highly intelligible within this system.

Obama-Joker is also material artifact interlinked with media architectures, populations, and political practices. The Obama-Joker is given form and content by what Manuel DeLanda calls an "assemblage." An assemblage, according to Manuel DeLanda, is the emergence of wholes from disparate parts that uses the metaphor of the body as an analytic tool for describing how miniscule elements connect. A computer, for example, is comprised of digital networks and passageways that disseminate information to various nodes, much like how a body's circulatory system transmits blood to organs. As a "versatile theory meant to apply to a wide variety of wholes constituted from heterogeneous parts,"[12] assemblage theory helps to analyze the ways in

which new media environments, defined by linked websites, embedded videos, and comment forums, interface not only with each other, but converge with "old" media such as television and film, as well as activities taking place in material spaces such as protests. Assemblage theory, moreover, provides a useful language to examine the interplay between the virtual and the social. Focusing on the movement and flow of digital data into "real world" spaces—for example, the travel of the Obama-Joker from an Adobe computer program to a protestor's T-shirt—exemplifies the union of the virtual and the social, the digital with the organic, the human body and the information body. This fusion is uniquely enabled and supported by media networks. The Obama-Joker assemblage includes these diverse components: cellular networks, fringe political websites and videos, Tea Party protest signs, *TDK*, viral marketing websites, and a populist manifesto. We suggest, in one of the key interventions put forth in this essay, that these technologies of material culture, when linked tightly together and infused with human passion, become, in a sense, actors in their own right.

Jasbir Puar's analysis of the assemblage of discourses that converge to produce the figure of the "terrorist" in U.S. nationalist, ideological discourse supplies a framework addressing some issues of importance to us, namely, the processes by which a discourse constructs its radical outside. The discursive construction of the terrorist indicates how notions of proper citizenship, sexuality, race, and national belonging are produced.[13] Our analysis examines not only a product of a system of assemblage, but also the effects of media citizenship it is partially responsible for producing and setting into motion.

The notion of populism is important in understanding the function and significance of Obama-Joker in Tea Party protests. Populism is a distinct mode of political organization defined by positioning itself against some person or group. In other words, populism must identify a bad guy—a villain. As Zizek explains, populism involves the fetishization and maligning of some external enemy, a "positive ontological entity whose annihilation would restore balance and justice."[14] The populist cause involves the movement's crystallization of some traumatic negativity (the shock of the Real) into a corporeal object. This object is then positioned as the quilting point of the entire symbolic, ideological order, and functions as its master signifier. When this master/monster signifier is obliterated, social harmony will supposedly be restored.

Mapping the Monstrous Sovereign's Travels: A Case Study

The beginnings of Obama-Joker can be traced to enthusiastic fan participation in *TDK* enterprise. In order to entice participants and get them actively involved in co-producing the *TDK* narrative, Warner Bros. and 42 Entertainment launched two websites, IBelieveinHarveyDent.com and IBelieveinHarveyDentToo.com (see Owczarski, this volume). The first website resembles a campaign website while the latter is a faux-vandalized version demonstrating the Joker's handiwork. The Joker, then, makes his first online appearance as a culture-jamming image defacing a political campaign poster. To return to the introduction, he is disrupting the established order. Crucially, his mode of disruption—at first associated with destroying hospitals—is now also explicitly *political* in nature. The Joker's universe of terror and ruin now unites disruption to both politics and medicine, giving us an early peek into how an assemblage of both feeling and technology is built across media platforms. On the vandalized version of Harvey Dent's website, the Joker has scrawled on Dent's face, scribbling black circles around his eyes and an elongated, red mouth slashed over Dent's.[15] Three months after then-Senator Barack Obama announced his candidacy for presidency, an iconic image of evil is born from the convergence of Hollywood villain and fictional politician, uniting audience labor, fan enthusiasm, political discourse, and interactive technologies. *TDK*'s fans' activities and creativity, moreover, produced material that ultimately inspired another digital creation: the most iconic images of monstrous sovereignty and abject difference of the contemporary epoch. Their actions certainly constitute the type of fan-based, "fun," and digitally oriented free labor that new media scholars have analyzed.[16] However, as an organ in a larger assembly of parts, their activities were so much more than this. While hard at work for Warner Bros. and 42 Entertainment, these enthusiastic workers helped introduce into the field of play a character who would come to define and unite a myriad of populist cells and directives. Where the fan activities were indicative of popular engagement, their creation became an icon of abjection and populism: a symbol of otherness, destruction, and difference that boils down to the devastating sociopolitical impact of *one evil villain*.

The early viral version of the Joker emerged in all kinds of spaces on- and offline that collided with each other, including T-shirts, memes, websites, placards, signs, bumper stickers, face paint, and .jpeg files. More than simply an image, he was an assembled bundle of energies. Passions eventually came to define his eventual union with Obama in an assemblage of digitized

protest, bits of image-data, and acts of cultural citizenship. As Kim Owczarski outlines in detail elsewhere in this volume, Warner Bros. and 42 Entertainment announced at Comic-Con 2007 the launch of a new interactive website that would provide interested fans with a peek at the Joker's full visage.[17] Those who appeared in Jokerface makeup were invited to participate in a real-space scavenger hunt, which involved looking for clues of the Joker's vandalism around San Diego. Fans who donned clownface at Comic-Con were provided with a password that granted access to a new website, which supplied them with information to participate in the scavenger hunt. On October 31, 2007, the website broadened its scope, inviting participants to uncover clues at various locations across the country, and send photographs of their progress. On-the-ground clues included a "jammed" version of the famous "I Want You" 1917 Uncle Sam military recruitment poster, which featured Uncle Sam in Jokerface.[18] Implementation of this image directly articulated the Joker, for the first time, to a figure connoting U.S. sovereignty and authority. Now, Joker is not just a political ne'er do well: he is a *political leader*.

Upon completion of the hunt, successful participants were directed to another website, where they were invited to send in pictures of themselves in Jokerface at various U.S. locations and landmarks.[19] Little pieces of what would eventually constitute Obama-Joker were being made and remade, traveling and appearing in various places and spaces. The Joker's viral traversal and presence had not yet coalesced with Obama's into a single image, but they were becoming intelligible through what is coming to be understood by media scholars as interactive, digitally based, cultural citizenship.[20] In the summer of 2007, for example, *Time* magazine announced that Obama's campaign was now "viral,"[21] an announcement that dovetailed with the Joker's own viral movement. The act of creating and circulating a Joker-ized image in interactive, digital spaces was becoming an act of citizenship. 42 Entertainment, for example, adopted the aesthetic and used the platform of a hacker/culture jammer, and narrativized the Joker, and the process of Joker-izing, as political dissent. This ethos would, many months later, define the circulation of the Obama-Joker as an act of political protest and a gesture of citizenship. The Joker expresses his opposition to mainstream politics by rendering the face of the sovereign abject, expressing political protest through digital culture jamming. A truly viral character whose physical presence could not be pinned down, the Joker had to be uncovered in snippets and discrete bits of information. Even the first peek at the Joker's image from the first scavenger hunt offered only a fleeting look; the composite whole quickly faded from view and was replaced with the words, "ha, ha, ha, see you in December."[22]

This multi-platform diffusion of information reveals, in a s ense, how an assemblage is built.

WhySoSerious.com c ontains n umerous a dditional i tems, s uch a s in teractive g ames w ith a c arnival a esthetic, p hotographs s ent in fr om r eal p articipants, an d (o riginal an d J oker-defaced) p ages fr om th e Go tham T imes website. These pages were organized into the Joker's "to-do" list, numbered 1–10. Item #8 included an image of Abraham Lincoln, the U.S. president heralded for signing the Emancipation Proclamation, in Jokerface. The image of the Lincoln-Joker precedes the Obama-Joker as the first instance of a U.S. president made up in Jokerface.[23] The first clownfaced president, notably, is famously associated with African-Americans.

RorysDeathKiss.com, the website aggregation of fan photos, included an image of a participant in Jokerface outside of the White House, holding up his hands with his fingers in Nixon-esque "V" formations; the caption to the photo reads, "I am a C rook."[24] This image brought the Joker literally to the door o f th e W hite H ouse dur ing O bama's p residential p rimary c ampaign, while mobilizing Nixon's iconic gesture and quote, evoking, for the first time in the Obama-Joker universe, presidential corruption and deceit. Well before Representative Joe Wilson shouted "you lie!" at President Obama on the floor of Congress, the suggestion of Obama as a deceitful and pernicious Other—an unpredictable villain with an awful gift for subterfuge—was being built in popular and fan culture.

Douglas K ellner ar gues th at O bama's p residential c ampaign an d e arly presidency are indicative of an am algamation between news and entertainment that culminated in the production of Obama as a "supercelebrity" and a "master of spectacle."[25] Obama-Joker embodies a uni on of politics, entertainment, and branding enabled by the assemblage of media platforms and cultural narratives. In the virtual space, the Joker's activities are launched as a form of protest against a political candidate, involving the alteration and redesign of a realistic-looking political website. In material spaces, participants assemble bits of this v irtual data with pieces of information from political history (e.g., Nixon's gesture and quote), combining them on their bodies and performing them on the ground. These on-the-ground hybrids of the material and virtual, in turn, return to virtual spaces by appearing online.

More than simply a form of clever marketing that taps affect and labor for the financial benefit of the culture industries, deployment of the Joker under the banner of political commentary hearkens to the sort of democratic, popular culture-oriented protest enacted by media users that Henry Jenkins recognizes as a d emocratic cornerstone of media convergence.[26] Through their

involvement with the website, participants in real space assist in the creation and circulation of an iconic image—the Jokerfaced politician. A shocking image of sovereignty rendered monstrous makes its first appearance in a website with a carnivalesque atmosphere—participants can link from a page devoted to "hosting portraits of presidents, all defaced in a grotesque manner"[27] to another where they can play digital carnival style games with an early-twentieth-century clown aesthetic. This slice of the assemblage works to build the universe of meaning around the Jokerfaced president. Jammed images with scrawled-out eyes and elongated mouths explicitly become clown figures when existing in the same virtual network as images of Ledger's Joker and the carnival games.

The assemblage that will eventually constitute the Obama-Joker is further built through this viral campaign through the inclusion of participant-submitted photographs. Visitors to the site are shown numerous pictures of participants in Jokerface. The pictures are situated alongside the Joker and Jokerfaced presidential images and captured in various locations around the world.[28] This aspect of the virtual space introduces a convergence of the material and the virtual—no longer strictly a digital/online phenomenon, the real-world, on-the-ground activities of the Jokerfaced bring the character into the material world, broadening the scope of his travels beyond the borders of the film studio and the Internet space. The narrative constructed by WhySoSerious.com around the Jokerface makeup is that of chaos, violence, and amorality: affects that feed the assemblage that will eventually become Obama-Joker. The convergence of virtual and material is brought to bear by the website's declaration of an "unholy alliance of technophiles and thugs . . . those on the ground were aided and abetted by their online accomplices."[29] Acknowledging that online platforms are an indispensible component of the Joker-mob's antics, this statement brings to bear a sense in which technologies converge with material activities to produce powerful affects and images. Let us now turn to a piece of Obama-Joker's universe that explicitly evokes populist causes and strives to galvanize a political community.

Populism, Alex Jones, and the Tea Party

The first noted appearance of the "official" Obama-Joker was at a political rally for vice presidential candidate Joe Biden in early November 2008.[30] The image of a Jokerfaced Obama was credited to a student named Firas Alkhateeb, who created the image with Adobe Photoshop and uploaded it onto Flickr, the

digital photography sharing site. The image was then downloaded, and others added the word "socialism" underneath the image, printed it, and circulated it. Obama-Joker's travels in another piece of the assemblage reveal where his political intelligibility picks up an extreme dimension and amplifies the racial politics of the image: the fringes of right-wing political extremism that evoke conspiracy theories. Scholars have analyzed conspiracy-theory discourse as symptomatic of the consequences of a proliferation of online media content, with extremism and the rise of fringe viewpoints as indicative of increased fragmentation and the rise of niche media communities. Technological shifts predicated on divergence and niche communities are intertwined with ideological changes, which implicate the loss of a robust public sphere.[31]

Alex J ones is an e xtremely p rolific d ocumentary filmmaker an d r adio talk sh ow h ost w ho m anages a l arge an d e xpanding m edia emp ire, in cluding t wo w ebsites, a str eaming talk r adio sh ow a vailable a s b oth a udio an d video feeds, and numerous documentary films available online and on DVD. Jones is beginning to receive scholarly attention for his outrageous brand of social criticism and ability to harness the power of media convergence for his projects. David Ray Carter has argued that Jones must be acknowledged as a serious documentary filmmaker, for "his grasp of the power of the medium and how to use it not only surpasses that of his Conspiracy Cinema peers, but even that of mainstream documentary filmmakers."[32] Barack Obama is now a mainstay in conspiracy culture (Carter, 2012).[33]

Jones, w ho is in terested in n on-mainstream th eories s uch a s th e 9/11 Truth M ovement, h as ta ken a p articular in terest in O bama-Joker, an d h as introduced him a s an imp ortant c haracter in his c ivil dis obedience a ctivities, which have included donning Jokerface to heckle police officers about alleged a buse o f p olice p owers. D ecrying O bama a s a " good p uppet o f th e offshore banks raping America," Jones lambasts "big daddy (Obama) Joker" as he plasters Obama-Joker "socialism" posters on telephone poles.[34] Wearing J okerface an d a "D on't T read o n M e" T-shirt, a c ommon im age a t Tea Party protests,[35] Jones drives around listening to a rap song about gangsters. Referencing the TARP bailout, Jones accuses Obama of being a member of a "criminal gang" who perpetrated a "bank heist." Jones's Obama-Joker brings an explicit racial dimension into the assemblage, evoking specific moral panic narratives of criminalized black culture, specifically gang affiliation, rape, and armed robbery.[36] These traits, in turn, are then ascribed to Obama-Joker. The "big daddy" and "rapist" references also evoke obscene, sexually deviant sovereignty, which subtly ties in with *TDK*'s queering of its version of the villain vis-à-vis transvestitism. Sexual deviance/queerness was an imp ortant piece

of Puar's terrorist assemblage,[37] and it is now informing the Obama-Joker assemblage as well.

As a white man wearing the digitally whitened visage of a Black man, Jones's performance also produces an odd racial logic. A white man in black/whiteface, Jones's articulation of the Jokerface becomes, at once, a stereotypical caricature of black masculine criminality and a duped prop concealing the agenda of white male power. Obama-Joker, as an individual enemy (as opposed to the mob built by *TDK* fans), is a shapeshifter, a master of disguise, and a deceitful and duplicitous trickster. These traits draw upon the pathologies of the movie villain. Obama-Joker, like the monster from the film, possesses an ability to "pass" that conceals his true intentions, giving him dangerous access to sensitive spaces. Nolan's Joker also led bank robberies, but here the villain is a sovereign figure, an evil tyrant who robs the bank via public policy (TARP). Masquerade, furthermore, was one of the key components of the assembled terrorist studied by Puar.[38] Obama-Joker's fluidity of identity contributes to his insidious, dangerous otherness. The whiteface image can also be found on the cover of one of Jones's most recent films, *The Obama Deception*, depicting Obama's face as a cheap cardboard mask being held over a slightly visible white face, held up by a white hand. Whereas Jones makes oblique reference to the racial logic of Obama-Joker, the DVD cover drives the point home,[39] and images of the blackface DVD cover are offered up by YouTube's algorithm as suggested viewing for those undertaking video searches for Jones in Joker makeup. All of these elements are important pieces of the Obama-Joker assemblage, working together to pull in bits of data into a whole.

Examples of bits that constitute the assemblage's parts are plentiful. In the summer of 2009, Jones held a contest offering a $1,000 cash prize to his listeners/viewers. The video mentioned above was part of a promotional initiative for this contest.[40] Fans were invited to make homemade videos where they plastered signs of Obama in Joker makeup onto courthouses, police stations, and, of course, hospitals. Entrants also prompted passersby to answer questions such as, "What's worse, smoking ten vials of crack per day or Obama's healthcare plan?" (posed to a black man). Again, tropes of black criminality and degeneracy enter the orbit of the contest and join the assemblage of Obama-Joker. Looking up the words "Obama Deception" on YouTube exposes the user to a range of Obama-Joker material, including a CNN story on the phenomenon, Jones's broadcast, and viewer videos using the Obama-Joker trope.[41] YouTube, in this sense, links Jones's fringe behavior to mainstream media coverage by offering CNN coverage in the same universe

of meaning. The CNN story features the *TDK* hospital clip discussed, effectively uniting Jones's projects with the Tea Party and the Hollywood film, assembling Obama-Joker out of parts from each narrative. Local news content, Fox News stories on Jones's contest, and material concerning the Obama-Joker phenomenon in general also appear on some of the lists. Through this interaction on YouTube, the margin and the center of political discourse are assembled. Not only does Jones circulate digital videos of himself protesting, his very appearance in Jokerface in material spaces is, similar to the contest entrants affiliated with *TDK*, an example of a virtual character transposed onto real bodies in real spaces, a hybrid body uniting the virtual and the material.

Appearing in the context of Jones's protest, contest, and radio program, Obama-Joker is further assembled as a racialized figure, a terrible sovereign, and the populist's abject Other. Although the depiction of sovereignty as inhuman monstrosity has been shown to have a long and complex history,[42] Obama-Joker is the first instance of such a sovereign binding racial logics, entertainment media, media technology, and populism. Wearing a T-shirt associated with the Tea Party, Obama-Joker-Jones ironically performs his abject status. His monstrosity and alterity become visually apparent as he appears in the same bundle of signification with the language ("Don't Tread on Me"; "socialism") that constitutes him as radical outside. Jones's agency as a media(ted) citizen certainly matters to this process, but so do the media platforms he inhabits, which comprise the universe of meanings that are assembled into the *abject object* he evokes and performs. In the context of the Joker scavenger hunt, the carnival aesthetic, and the queering imagery from the original film, Obama-Joker's contours and dimensions as populism's monstrous other take shape.

Moving to Jones's website from the video of his performance in Jokerface gives more insight into the meaning-making system in play here. In the T-shirt section of Jones's website's online store, visitors are presented with an array of material featuring the visage of Barack Obama. Other shirts and merchandise feature the "Don't Tread on Me" logo and variants of the Gadsden Flag.[43] Both this slogan and image have become popular among the Tea Party Patriots.[44] All of the products, to varying degrees, link the symbolic universe of Infowars to the Tea Party Patriot movement. One of the most striking examples, moreover, gives a clear indication of how this network is implicated in assembling an enemy through racialized and nationalist discourses. One of the shirts displays a black-and-white photograph of Obama, with the name "Barry Soetoro" in large typeface above Obama's head, and the Infowars logo

on the back. Underneath Obama's image, the question, "Where is the birth certificate?" shouts for an answer.[45] "Barry Soetoro" is associated with the so-called "birther" movement, a coalition that maintains that Obama is not a natural-born citizen of the United States, and is thereby unqualified to hold the office of the presidency. The birthers think that Obama is a hostile foreign national and/or rootless cosmopolitan intent on the treasonous destruction of U.S. national sovereignty. He sometimes takes the form of a radical Muslim and stranger to Western values, and sometimes of an anti-white racist whose agenda involves the redistribution of white wealth to undeserving minorities through universal healthcare.[46]

The birther strand links to the more popular network of the Tea Party and libertarian patriot movements through use of abject Obama imagery. Anti-Obamacare Tea Party protest signs have depicted him, among other abject subjects, as Obama-Joker masquerading as a doctor,[47] an image evocative of the hospital scene in *TDK*. These images, in various ways, evoke notions of racialized otherness along with the horror of the masquerading enemy, elements that contribute to the assemblage of abject difference that informs Obama-Joker. The Joker always manifests as an insidious figure with a predilection for disguise, but Obama-Joker's subterfuge is more directly focused on destroying U.S. nationalism by redistributing wealth. Like the Joker in the film, he uses duplicitous masquerade to invade medical spaces. The trope of medicalized violation can be found in anti-healthcare reform cartoons, which implicitly liken the new law to rape.[48] Obama-Joker-Nurse appears in this orbit as well, whose violations now explicitly demarcate him as a racial other.[49] Again, tropes of sexual violation, deceit, costume, disruption of medical protocol, and racial otherness are assembled around the sign of Obama-Joker. The contemporary iteration of the Joker further articulates anti-Obama sentiment, through Obama-Joker, to the Joker's new persona as an economic terrorist. Mapping the two alongside each other gives some indication into how discourses of abjection are crafted and take hold in the contemporary media landscape. The populist charge, that Obama is a masquerading trickster intent on redistributing white wealth to minorities through universal healthcare, is intertwined with the ways in which the popular culture villain has changed to become a reckless "terrorist" who does not respect money, financial systems, and the "established order" of medical care.

Conclusion: Where's the Joker?

Following a 2010 controversy involving airport body scanners and pat-downs, Charles Krauthammer, a conservative columnist, penned a manifesto. Responding to an utterance made by the man whose experience launched the debate, Krauthammer named "Don't Touch My Junk" as "the anthem of the modern man." The anthem reads, in part:

> Don't touch my junk is the anthem of the modern man, the Tea Party patriot, the late-life libertarian, the midterm election voter. Don't touch my junk, Obamacare-get out of my doctor's examining room. I'm wearing a paper-thin gown slit down the back. Don't touch my junk . . . do you really think I'm a Nigerian nut job . . . ?[50]

Krauthammer's manifesto unites the airport incident with the Tea Party, bringing the famous monster signifier into the mix and tying multiple groups—including voters, the "modern man," and the Tea Party—together in an assemblage of populist, masculinist, white (or, at least, not Nigerian) citizenship. These are the groups, the logic goes, most vulnerable to Obama-Joker's violations. This is one way in which notions of citizenship are made through, by, and around media *vis-à-vis* its iconic, popular-culture monsters. Krauthammer's manifesto mobilizes numerous citizen groups under the sign of an affectively charged imagery of abject otherness. All of these components build a populist citizen base structured against a certain terrible other: the Obama-Joker.

Krauthammer's manifesto evokes the hospital image from *TDK* and introduces Obama (as "Obamacare" personified) into the mix, exemplifying one assemblage of the Obama-Joker and, more important, simultaneously pulling him from the margins of conspiracy populism, and from Hollywood fantasy, into the orbit of the modern man's "battle cry" as his constitutive outside, his enemy. Krauthammer does not need to mention Obama-Joker directly; he is there, lurking in the shadows of the assemblage's unconscious, visualizable as the harassing, abusing monster-tyrant in the hospital waiting room. The network pulls in little bits of him, snippets and sneak peeks, "ha, ha, has"—never enough to confront the terrible object of the gaze straight on. The look is always partial, for the assemblage is not a totality or whole; it is itself a bundle of pieces, discrete bits of data brought together. This assemblage allows for the full meaning of Obama-Joker to evade our direct gaze; he is apprehended as a partial object[51] by examining different facets of the assemblage at different times. Here the abject *object*,[52] the obscene, perverted

sovereign,[53] lurking and leering in a hospital waiting room, manically joyful at the prospect of exploiting the late-life libertarian's vulnerability ("slit down the back" connotes sexual vulnerability and fear of penetration). The Joker's donning of a dress and wig to perpetrate his offense, as well as Jones's allegation of rape, both charge the assemblage with abjection and queer its villainous quilting point. "Obamacare" allegedly violates the boundaries of legitimate governance, policy, law, and the body itself. Obama-Joker emerges as the monstrous sovereign and abject quilting point against which this constituency of media citizens—the populist, the Tea Party patriot, the "modern man," the "late-life libertarian"—can align. The bundle of material covered—including YouTube videos, mainstream news coverage of the Obama-Joker containing references to *TDK*, fringe political websites and videos, and *TDK* and related websites—indicates how network-building can create meaning-making systems that extend in scope and reach beyond any single text or author. At once threatening economic and cultural stability, sexual mores, national stability, and legitimate citizenship, Obama-Joker shows us the importance of mapping popular culture events alongside changing political and technological discourses and climates.

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KISS WITH A FIST

The Gendered Power Struggle of the Joker and Harley Quinn

toSha taylor

"It is to laugh, huh, Mistah J?"

With this strange phrase, Harley Quinn entered the Batman universe in the twenty-second episode of *Batman: The Animated Series*, "Joker's Favor."[1] The Joker did not answer her question, but he didn't need to; Harley's first appearance was enough to inspire fans' fervor, and she quickly became a fan favorite, particularly among female viewers. Her wild popularity aided her transition from DC's animated universe to the DC comics universe in 1999, a feat at which very few characters (among them Renee Montoya and Mercy Graves) have been successful.[2] She has subsequently appeared in several titles, including her own solo series from 2001–2003, the short-lived *Gotham City Sirens* (2009–2012), and a new solo series beginning in November 2013, as well as the highly successful video games *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (2009) and *Batman: Arkham City* (2011). In addition, she is a frequent choice of cosplayers of all ages, due to both her exuberant personality and traditionally *un*revealing costume.[3] But despite Harley's independent success, it is her relationship with the Joker for which she is most known. Indeed, while the Joker seems perfectly capable of existing as a character without his henchwench, Harley has not yet gained such autonomy. Her relationship with the Joker remains a motif in comics in which Harley appears, even when the story does not feature an appearance by the Joker himself. Her solo stories often return to the subject of her association with the Joker, featuring flashbacks of their past exploits, present-day conflicts, or simply centering on Harley as she laments his absence. In any given story in which Harley appears alone, it is an understood imperative that the Joker exists and has been involved with her, yet no such imperative governs Joker-centric stories. Harley's dependence on the Joker and the Joker's seeming *in*dependence becomes problematic even

outside the narrative, however, for the characteristically abusive nature of their relationship.

Violence against women is not a new phenomenon in comics. Even Batman, despite adhering to a strict moral code, has hit women for merely distracting him. While Batman's occasional assaults on women are, for the most part, a thing of the past, the relationship between the Joker and Harley has drawn much criticism from fans for its persistent and dramatic depiction of domestic abuse. In keeping with their carnivalesque criminal personas, the Joker and Harley imbue instances of abuse with theatricality, which, on one hand, may serve to lighten their violence by assuring the reader that it's "only a joke," while on the other hand adding a layer of grotesquerie absent in violence enacted by any other character. With acts ranging from emotional coercion to murder attempts, the violence between Gotham's most famous clowns often crosses the line from funny to disturbing, prompting some writers to separate the couple—and yet the characters seem doomed to repeat their morbid cycle of unrequited love and physical abuse.

Though we cannot justify the clown couple's criminal violence or the Joker's habitual abuse of his partner, we can seek to explain it through application of Foucault's exploration of subjecthood and Judith Butler's ideas of gender performativity. The relationship between the Joker and Harley, per Foucault's and Butler's respective arguments, becomes a representation of the cyclical nature of gendered power struggles in which emotional and physical abuse are rooted in a desire for *and* a rejection of the gendered subject. The Joker and Harley, knowingly or not, perform both active and passive roles within their relationship: both retain their subjecthood while acting out in support *or* rejection of their objectification by the gaze of the other. Any instance of seeming independence is merely performative, for both the Joker and Harley depend on each other for maintenance of their perceived autonomy. For the Joker, violence and psychological abuse become the means through which false notions of autonomy are achieved, and his power as male subject derives, once he has become partnered with Harley, from ritualistic performances of male-on-female subjugation.

Foucault (1982) provides two definitions of the *subject*, that which is "subject to someone else by control and dependence" and that which is "tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge."[4] For the Joker, Harley appears to fall into both categories. His control over her is a clear fact of which both characters seem aware, though the Joker would often appear to not consider Harley at all. However, despite his pretenses at ignoring his henchwench and her affections, the Joker actively makes her a subject to his control, ties

her t o his i dentity thr ough p ositioning hims elf a s th e m odel f or h er o wn criminal persona, *and* grounds himself in his own persona through subjugating her and seeing a mirror of himself in her. Butler (1990) warns that, when belonging to a male subject, power is neither innate nor independent:

> His seemingly self-grounded autonomy attempts to conceal the repression which is both its ground and the perpetual possibility of its own ungrounding. But that process of meaning-constitution requires that women reflect that masculine power and everywhere reassure that power of the reality of its illusory autonomy.[5]

While he is Go tham's m ost f earsome villain, th e J oker is inh erently at constant risk of being deposed, whether by another villain,[6] by Batman, or by his own grisly demise. He must exercise control to assure himself of his own power, and Harley offers a m eans thr ough which h e may witness and judge his own exercise of power. Alluding to Lacan, Butler (1990) identifies the female subject as the symbolic phallus through which the literal phallus is reflected; the male subject, then, "requires this Other to confirm and, hence, to be the Phallus in its 'extended' sense."[7] If Harley represents the Joker's phallic power, her presence is not expendable, as the Joker would appear to believe, but necessary; likewise, to embody her beloved criminal persona, Harley requires the Joker. Butler further explicates phallic juxtaposition with attention paid to relationships based in subjugation, finding a "failed reciprocity" in which the dominant, empowered party comes to depend upon the one who is typically dis empowered an d s ubjugated, f or th e l atter s erves a s a "r eflection" of th e former's s elf an d agency.[8] E ven while subjugating h er thr ough r itual abuse, the Joker relies on Harley as a means through which he accomplishes his criminal work and appraises his own demonstrations of power.

The J oker's d ependence o n H arley f or m aintenance o f illu sory p ower is suggested even in Harley's first appearance. Indeed, his reliance on her is apparent immediately after her first line in her first appearance, for instead of answering her question, the Joker responds with one of his own: "I ask you, Harley, who's g iven m ore h ours of am usement t o th e Go tham p olice f orce than me?" "No one, Mistah J," she replies, and proceeds, following the Joker's next s elf-aggrandizing l ine, t o c heer f or h im.[9] The J oker's o ther t wo h enchmen, however, fail to so much as notice that the Joker has been speaking. It is only when th e J oker f lashes th em an ang ry l ook th at th ey engage in th e scene, but we should note that they don't respond to the Joker, but rather to Harley, wordlessly mirroring her enthusiasm and joining in her applause. Later in the episode, the Joker relies on Harley to set the stage for his climactic

and potentially deadly prank. Not only does she push the giant cake in which the Joker is hiding into the ballroom where a dinner to honor Commissioner Gordon is being held, she also detonates the gas-filled candles that paralyze the partygoers. As the gas is released, she provides a protective mask for the downtrodden Charlie Collins so that he, as another part of the Joker's prank, will be able to struggle (but not to escape) as his own death nears. Once the Joker has emerged from the cake, Harley is the only person capable of cheering for him, and it is she, not the Joker, who makes a crack about the "audience's" inability to respond. Finally in the scene, it is Harley, not the Joker, who attaches the bomb to the paralyzed Commissioner Gordon. Once Batman has disposed of Harley by handcuffing her to a pipe, the Joker at last meets the Dark Knight, from whom he spends most of the scene hiding. At the episode's end, the Joker is bested by Charlie Collins, who threatens to kill him in an alleyway, thus robbing him of the glory of being defeated by Batman. Emasculated, the Joker cries out for Batman's help, and then cowers behind the hero's cape. In retrospect, the Joker himself accomplishes next to nothing in the episode, depending on Harley to act as his cheerleader, stagehand, and enactor of his plans. Without her help, he quickly becomes powerless.

Readers of Batman comics realized Harley's power as a character when she entered the DCU proper as part of the epic *No Man's Land* storyline, in a one-shot written by her original creator Paul Dini, *Batman: Harley Quinn* (1999). The Joker, too, becomes aware of just what an effect his henchwench inadvertently had, and, threatened by her existence, responds to her moment of power the only way he can—by trying to kill her. In a surprising moment for his character, the Joker tells Harley the reason he must kill her is his own failure to remain a bachelor around her:

> I've felt some changes coming over me since you entered my life. I've been reminded of what it's like to be part of a couple, to care for someone who cares for me. It's the first time in recent memory I've had those feelings . . . and I hate having those feelings! They're upsetting, confusing, and worse, distracting me from getting my share of Gotham now that the gettin's good![10]

Here, the Joker makes three admissions: 1) that he does, in fact, care for Harley, 2) that their relationship is a romantic one (it is doubtful he would refer to their pairing as a "couple" if he meant only platonic friendship), and 3) that his feelings for her prevent him from fulfilling the role he normally occupies as the psychotic scourge of Gotham. Just as Batman sometimes finds it hard to balance his relationships with Catwoman and, prior to her return to

unambiguous villainy, Talia al Ghul, with his role as the self-appointed savior of the city, the Joker finds that he cannot function as Gotham's most fearsome villain if he gives in to his unexpected desire for a romantic partnership with Harley.

Butler's 1990 preface to *Gender Trouble* offers insight to the Joker's violent rejection of a relationship with Harley: "For that masculine subject of desire, trouble became a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female 'object' who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position."[11] If the Joker is positioned as Batman's exact opposite, a human but nonetheless extremely powerful villain who can never be permanently bested, then the arrival of Harley Quinn as a romantic figure in his life essentially heralds a loss in his perceived power. If the Joker can become the *object* of the female gaze, he must step down somewhat from his h eterosexual male *subjecthood*. He, who normally objectifies others through his violence and deadly pranks, finds himself objectified. The female gaze emasculates him, and his body becomes the site of anxiety about the nature of masculine power. His response, as a homicidal psychopath, is to seek to destroy Harley's gaze, thereby reasserting his own place as an empowered male subject.

The clown couple's violent power struggle is p erhaps best exemplified in Harley's first origin story, "Mad Love," which won the Eisner Award for Best Single Story in 1994 (originally published as *The Batman Adventures: Mad Love*, adapted into an episode of the same name for the final season of *Batman: The Animated Series*, and collected into *Batman: Mad Love and Other Stories* (for this discussion, I will be referring to its most recent publication). Disappointed when Batman insults an element—for which Harley was responsible—of his most recent plan to kill Commissioner Gordon, the Joker ignores Harley's attempt to seduce him and instead berates her, squirts acid from his boutonniere at her, and, finally, literally kicks her out of their home.[12] Rather than realizing that the Joker is no good for her, Harley vows to win back his affection by killing Batman herself, using an old plan the Joker has discarded. Correcting a mistake in the Joker's plan, Harley succeeds in abducting and disabling Batman, but succumbs to the Dark Knight's manipulation of her feelings for the Joker and calls her mentor to tell him what she's done. Enraged, the Joker imagines not being robbed of the glory of killing Batman himself but emasculating comments from other villains. "There goes the Joker," he imagines the Penguin saying, "the guy whose girlfriend killed Batman!"[13] The Riddler further insults him: "Oh yeah, that's what's-his-name . . . y ou know . . . Mr . Harley Quinn!"[14] When he arrives at the scene, the Joker ignores Batman and

immediately attacks Harley, hitting her so hard with a phallic comedy prop that she falls through a window, plummeting several stories to the street below (p. 60–61). Renee Montoya finds her lying among the garbage in a dark pool of blood; Harley's lines disturbingly mirror the self-blame of domestic abuse victims: "My fault . . ." she tells Montoya, "I didn't get the joke."[15] The final blow, Batman later tells the Joker, is that Harley almost succeeded in killing him where the Joker has consistently failed.[16] The story's conclusion returns to Harley's point of view as she, covered in bandages and casts, is brought back to her cell at Arkham Asylum. Dr. Leland asks her a question meant to remind her of the Joker's abusive nature: "So, tell me, Harley—how did it feel to be so dependent on a man, that you'd give up everything for him, gaining nothing in return?"[17]Injured and dejected, Harley starts to answer, "It felt like . . ."—but then, seeing a single rose the Joker has sent her, her love-dazed face breaks into a smile and she finishes with an unexpected response. ". . . it felt like a kiss . . !" she says.[18] In sending the rose and a card with a noncommittal message ("Feel better soon. — J."), the Joker has, at least unconsciously, returned to needing Harley as a guarantor of his villainous power, and has sought to ensure her eventual return to him.

That the language characters use in the story is similar to that of real-life abuse victims and perpetrators is no coincidence, nor should we overlook its gendered meanings, in which the male perpetrator assumes dominance through emotional and physical subjugation of the female object, who, in turn, accepts the abuse as her fault and, out of her own affection for him, forgives her abuser at the slightest sign of repentance (here, undoubtedly feigned). In March 19, 2010, interview with *Rocket Llama*, Paul Dini explicitly characterized the Joker's relationship with Harley as far from egalitarian: "The Joker looks at her as someone to make himself feel better and to have someone to do the work he doesn't want to do. Is it great relationship? No! It's pretty abusive!"[19]Dini's statement not only clears up any doubt that the relationship between the Joker and Harley is, in fact, an abusive one, but also suggests Butler's assessment of gendered power dynamics. If, as Dini says, the Joker uses Harley as means of self-aggrandizement, her presence as his longsuffering partner becomes, once their relationship has begun, absolutely necessary. That she can be perceived as "long-suffering" is also necessary, with particular emphasis on the idea of *suffering*, for Harley must suffer (here meaning *tolerate*) the Joker's psychologically and physically abusive behaviors and must suffer (here, experience pain and injury) at his hands. Furthermore, her suffering must occur as part of a gendered performance of suffering; in the case of "Mad Love," she imagines a loving marriage to the Joker,

complete with children and beachside talks, while his future fantasy exposes his terror of being thought less than a man by his male criminal rivals. As the female victim-object, Harley perceives the rose as a token of the Joker's love, a play on the traditional gendered courtship ritual.

Butler (1990) reminds us that gender performance is not a unique occurrence, but rather, "the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation."[20] If we look at the Joker's relationship with Harley Quinn as a means of performing gender, we see that the abusive pattern established in "Mad Love" is necessary for its performance. The Joker must accept Harley as his devoted henchwench, must fail to reciprocate her love for him (either through a genuine incapacity for such feelings or through active denial of such a capacity), must enact violence against her, and then must repeat the pattern by accepting her back as a partner in crime when she inevitably returns to him. Likewise, Harley must, despite any moments of independent agency that occur in the interim, return to the Joker and suffer their violent routine once more. The necessity for repetition conforms to Foucault's (1982) explication of a power-based relationship as "a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others" but "acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future."[21] If we apply Butler's and Foucault's call for performed repetition to "Mad Love," we find that each violent or psychologically abusive act is not an independent performance but part of a sequence. The Joker ignores Harley's attempt to seduce him because he views her as a distraction; she steals his rejected plan to kill Batman because he has ignored her; he attacks her because, by stealing, correcting, and implementing his plan, she has bested him at nearly killing Batman. The power of his violence is made clear through a shot of Harley lying in the street in a pool of blood. Taken back to Arkham, Harley might be expected to recognize the Joker's abusive nature and forsake him, but, needing the reflection of himself in his partner, the Joker sends Harley a gift of condolence; she remembers her affection for him; the cycle repeats.

Further evidence of the notion of a gendered power struggle between them is apparent when the typical model of that struggle is disrupted. Disruptions of the model often come in the form of Harley exercising cruelty. Though intended as a lighthearted, cartoonish character, Harley is not without her own capacity for brutality and violence, though she acts upon that capacity with bubbly, sometimes naïve, playfulness. In the past, she has shown

no moral objections to causing potentially fatal injuries to Gotham's heroes and civilians. In a particularly dark depiction of her malicious nature, *Gotham City Sirens* #20–21 depicted Harley using her knowledge of characters' past traumas to manipulate—and ultimately kill—them.[22] Her violence, however, is itself another mirror of the Joker, for it has an origin in the Joker's own actions. Harley's reflection of the Joker often seems a willing performance, rather than an intrinsic identity; it is an aspect of the "Harley Quinn" persona but not its whole. In *Batman: Harley Quinn*, when choosing her costume as part of the persona's creation, Harley rejects a feminized version of the Joker's signature purple suit, calling this getup "too derivative."[23] By rejecting adoption of the Joker's appearance, Harley becomes a more active reflection of her mentor, for, without the purple suit and green wig, she must reflect him in more substantial ways—her actions, language, reactions, and so on. When Harley commits atrocities, she is essentially serving as a mirror of the Joker's power.

But Harley's violence is rarely interpreted, by readers and by other characters, as being as severe or disturbing as that of the Joker. When the Joker ignores her, hits her, pushes her through the window of a high-rise, or attempts to kill her by launching her in a rocket, his violence against her is undeniably troubling. Conversely, when Harley shoots him for ignoring her as she does in *Batman* #663, "The Clown at Midnight," a comedic overtone cancels out the shock of a potentially fatal wounding.[24] We may cite Harley's girlish personality and occasional attempts to lead a crime-free lifestyle as the reason for her exoneration. The most probable reason, however, is the disparity between her actions against the Joker and his against her.

As long as the Joker abuses Harley, Harley's violence may be interpreted as somehow "less" than the Joker's. Once that element is removed, however, Harley becomes a more sinister figure; in *not* abusing his partner, the Joker appears to lose some of his masculine power. Brian Azzarello's graphic novel *Joker* (2008) reimagines the Joker as a noir-esque crime boss with an addiction to pills and a temper far greater than his sense of humor. Harley appears at his side in her signature costume, but Azzarello's Harley lacks a voice, speaking not even a single line through the entire story. Loss of voice does not, however, equal a loss in capacity for violence. At the beginning of the graphic novel, following a reverse striptease in which Harley seductively gets *into* her costume, she appears to assist the Joker in skinning a man alive for spectacle;[25] later, disguised in a gorilla suit (most likely an homage to Marlene Dietrich's reveal in *Blonde Venus* [1932]), she ruthlessly guns down members of a rival gang.[26] The Joker does not act out against Azzarello's Harley; rather,

in a startling moment of vulnerability, he kneels in front her and weeps openly as her body supports him. Though their relationship is not explored in the graphic novel, Azzarello admits his efforts to present a different version of the couple than readers expect: "I think I played Harley against type. . . . Instead of comic relief, she's muscle. The Joker keeps her close because she protects him."[27] Azzarello goes further to state that, by loving the Joker, Harley "takes on all the worst aspects of his personality."[28]

While her adoption of Joker-esque traits is not a novel concept (there has never been any debate about Harley's criminal persona as a living homage to her mentor/partner), Azzarello's Harley enacts violence in a far colder manner than is traditional for the character, and this dramatic change in her personality imbues her with a level of frightening unpredictability normally reserved for the Joker himself. Harley becomes a site of anxiety for the reader, who cannot take amusement in her jokes and misguided love for the Joker, for neither are present. The fact that the Joker does not seem to find a similar site of anxiety in her disquiets the scene in which he cries in front her, for this scene disrupts the dynamic to which the reader is accustomed. The Joker surrenders his autonomous power and accepts a new subjecthood through *subjecting* himself to his lover. Harley, conversely, adopts the role normally fulfilled by the Joker, appearing emotionally removed from the scene as she allows the Joker's prostration but maintains her hold on her cigarette and champagne flute. This scene starkly depicts the relocation of the seat of power as it is transferred from the emasculated Joker to the stoic Harley. The story's narrator, Jonny Frost, cannot look long at the scene and neither can the reader, for our intimate view into the Joker's bedroom is abruptly ended by a location change. Near the end of the novel, the Joker reclaims his masculine power in a sexually charged attack against Jonny, not through lashing out against the man who saw him at his weakest, but through raping Jonny's girlfriend.

Perhaps the greatest disruption of the gendered power struggle between the Joker and Harley, however, occurs in an alternate universe. While never explicitly stated, we can infer that the Joker's emotional manipulation of and physical violence against Harley are based on their respective genders from the fact that the abuse does not occur when the Joker is not male. The Joker received a female treatment in *Elseworlds*, a collection of stories taking place outside mainstream comics continuity that allows writers to explore alternate possibilities and universes for DC characters. In Howard Chaykin and Dan Brereton's *Elseworlds* installment *Batman: Thrillkiller* (1997), a female Joker (Bianca Steeplechase) engages in a seemingly egalitarian relationship

with Harley. Their association is still a romantic one, but the Joker's shift from heterosexual man to lesbian woman removes all traces of domestic abuse. Bianca Steeplechase's femininity is emphasized even when she commits acts of brutal criminality; the second time she appears in the story, she is applying lipstick in a bathroom mirror while Two-Face and other henchmen hold a man's face underwater.[29] Standing in an erotic pose, breasts and rump pushed out, Bianca directs the men's actions from her place at the mirror. Both panels in which she appears on the following page further call attention to her breasts, and for the rest of the story, her cleavage may as well be part of her costume. When she kills Robin, her weapon is literally sexuality, for she forcibly penetrates his mouth with her own poison-laced tongue.[30] Though Harley does not appear until late in the story, Bianca's relationship with her quickly takes the foreground. Instead of insulting or berating her henchwench, the female Joker compliments Harley, her hands noticeably touching her.[31] As they torture Batman, Bianca gives Harley a ring to "cement [their] relationship;"[32] we can contrast this moment to a scene of "The Man Who Killed Batman," the fifty-first episode of *Batman: The Animated Series*, in which the Joker forces Harley to give up the jewelry that would have been the spoils of their latest caper because, realizing Batman might actually be dead, he has become depressed. In addition to physical abuse, *Thrillkiller* removes such acts of emotional abuse and neglect, for the female Joker lacks her male counterpart's need for reflection through subjugation. The story concludes with the Joker dead and Harley alive and on a murderous rampage, clearly able to function as a criminal without her lover and partner.[33]

Ultimately, we may ask if it is necessary for a male Joker to engage in domestic abuse *and* for a female Joker to engage in a lack of it. Discursive notions of gendered sexuality may indicate that this dramatic difference *is*, in fact, born out of necessity. Butler (2009) emphatically argues that, while gender and sexuality are two distinctly different categories, their popularly perceived correlation results in specific needs in their depictions, for "certain forms of sexuality are linked with phantasies about gender, and certain ways of living gender require certain kinds of sexual practices."[34] By this argument, a male Joker engaged in a heterosexual relationship with Harley is inherently expected to enact violence against her, whereas the opposite enactment is expected of the lesbian Joker. Combining this argument with Butler's decree of a lack of agency in gender performance, we find that, as a character, Bianca Steeplechase has little (or even *no*) choice in "performing" an egalitarian, non-abusive relationship with Harley, while the male Joker, in all his incarnations, cannot choose *but* to abuse her.

Foucault (1982) describes methods of mutual government by men (used here to indicate mankind, not the male gender) as dialectical and perpetually alterable: "they are superimposed, they cross, impose their own limits, sometimes cancel one another out, sometimes reinforce one another."[35] Mutual exercises of violence, though not on egalitarian terms due to their gendered meanings, ensure that the Joker and Harley continue participating in the cycle of action and reaction that binds them together. Other characters, like Poison Ivy, and fans may wish Harley to finally give up the Joker for good and lead her own life without him and his abusive influence, but the very nature of her self-creation as a criminal makes her dependent upon him for the continued performance of her carnivalesque identity. Moreover, though he is unlikely to admit to such, the Joker requires her to reassure himself of his own power. Though he existed for decades without her, now that Harley has entered the Joker's life, his identity has itself become at least partially rooted in his subjugation of her. It is from Harley, not his struggle with Batman, that the Joker gains his violent power in the stories that depict their grotesque love triangle. Implications that Harley might be pregnant with his child at the end of the *Arkham City* video game further suggest that both creators and fans still have an appetite for this relationship, problematic though it may be. Having become bound to Harley in 1992, the Joker cannot now extricate himself from her without an act of destruction that will leave him just as bloodied and objectified as he has often left her.

Notes

1. "Joker's Favor," *Batman: The Animated Series*, directed by Boyd Kirkland (1992; Los Angeles: CA Fox, 1992), Television.

2. Mercy Graves would transition to the comics the same year as Harley in *Detective* #735 (Rucka, 1999).

3. The redesign of her costume for *Suicide Squad* as part of DC's "New 52" has drawn much ire from fans and cosplayers for being too "dark" and sexualized.

4. Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 781.

5. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 57–58.

6. The Joker's criminal exploits, though often heinous, may at times pale in comparison to those of Ra's al Ghul, whose assault on Gotham prior to *No Man's Land* (1999) did far more damage to the city than the Joker can. Similarly, it was Bane, not the Joker, who unseated Batman in *Knightfall* (1993).

7. Ibid., 56.

8. Ibid., 56–57

9. Kirkland, "Joker's Favor."

10. Paul Dini and Bruce Timm, "Mad Love," in *Mad Love and Other Stories* (New York: DC Comics, 2009), 8–72 (originally published in *The Batman Adventures: Mad Love*, 1994).

11. Though extremely popular, Harley has not been unanimously accepted as a powerful character by all comics fans, as evidenced by frequent arguments that arise around her existence in the DCU on message boards and fan blogs. Butler's argument may perhaps shed light onto fan resistance to, in addition to the Joker's rejection of, Harley.
12. Dini and Timm, "Mad Love," 22–26.
13. Ibid., 56.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 62.
16. Ibid., 68.
17. Ibid., 72.
18. Ibid.
19. Nick Langley, "Interview: Paul Dini (Arkham Asylum, Harley Quinn, Ewoks, and Pomegranate Blackberry Yogurt)," *Rocket Llama*, last modified March 19, 2010, http://www.rocketllama.com/blog-it/2010/03/19/interview-paul-dini-arkham-asylum-harley-quinn-ewoks-and-pomegranate-blackberry-yogurt/.
20. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 178.
21. Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 789.
22. Peter Calloway, Andres Guinaldo, Ramon Bachs, Lorenzo Ruggiero, and J. D. Smith, *Gotham City Sirens* #20–21, April–May 2011 (New York: DC Comics).
23. Paul Dini, Yvel Guichet, Aaron Sowd, Richard Horie, and Tanya Horie, *Batman: Harley Quinn* (New York, DC Comics, 1999).
24. Grant Morrison and John Van Fleet, "The Clown at Midnight," in *Batman and Son* (New York: DC Comics, 2007), 105–128 (originally published in *Batman* #663, August 2007).
25. Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo, *Joker* (New York: DC Comics, 2008), n.p.
26. Ibid.
27. Dan Phillips, "The Joker's Wild Ride," *IGN*, last modified October 23, 2008, http://www.ign.com/articles/2008/10/23/the-jokers-wild-ride.
28. Ibid.
29. Howard Chaykin and Dan Brereton, *Batman: Thrillkiller* (New York: DC Comics, 1997), 31.
30. Ibid., 73.
31. Ibid., 117.
32. Ibid., 119.
33. Ibid., 128.
34. Judith Butler, "Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics," *Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 4, no. 3 (2009): xii.
35. Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 793.

MORE THAN THE HOOD WAS RED

The Joker as Marxist

richard d. heldenfels

In Frank Miller's comic book epic *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), two television commentators debate the return of Batman after a decade's absence. The Joker, confined to an asylum and seeming almost comatose, overhears the TV discussion. His eyes widen, his notorious grin forms, and he stammers, "Batman."[1] It appears their old game is about to resume. But especially significant in the Joker's recognition is the description he hears of his rival, not only as "an aberrant psychotic force" (a phrase that many would apply to the Joker himself) but as someone who is a "morally bankrupt, politically hazardous, reactionary paranoid—a danger to every citizen of Gotham."[2] This is the Batman the Joker knows best, the one he has long seen in political terms; it is the same Batman whose ideas the Joker has opposed since his debut in the first *Batman* comic in 1940.[3]

The Joker-Batman relationship has long had an element of play, even if that play involved incredible savagery. But their long dance is not simply about that, or even about the broad strokes of a criminal against a crime-stopper. It is about a far deeper struggle, with Batman a representative of the ruling class being repeatedly confronted by a Joker who wants to destroy the class system. In that context, it will take more than the mere death of one or the other to end the warfare of which they are part. Batman could be killed or unmasked, and the forces he represents would remain in power. If the Joker dies, the masses remain. So, for the Joker, the long-term goal is not to destroy Batman, but to end the system that Batman protects.

This goes against two of the more traditional interpretations of the Joker; that he is either a madman or an anarchist. The argument for madness is often made, as when writer Brad Meltzer said in the introduction to one tale that the Joker is "easy to understand. He's insane."[4] But that notion is too

glib; Anthony Kolenic observed that the Joker is more frightening because he "taps into something the audience cannot completely write off as psychosis."[5] The case for the Joker as an anarchist seems stronger, since the word is so often applied to him; for example, in the DVD extras for Tim Burton's *Batman*, a DC Comics executive refers to the Joker as an anarchist,[6] and the comic book *Batman: Impostors* says people emulating the Joker are following an "anarchist" leader[7] on their way to "lawless anarchy."[8] However, this, too, is the reduction of a more complex ideology into the sort of simplistic description that might easily fit into a comic's dialogue balloon.

To be sure, some of the Joker's actions fit into the broad idea of anarchy; he is at one with that cause in the negating of state control over people, for instance. But there are two major areas in which Marxism diverges from anarchism. One is that Marxism is keenly focused on the place in society of capital, which Marx considered "not a personal, but . . . a social power";[9] the pointlessness of the pursuit of capital and its underlying power recurs in Joker stories, as shall be detailed. Even more to the point—and key to the misunderstanding of the Joker as an anarchist—is the way anarchists and Marxists view the concentration of power in different ways, that the struggle between communism's Marx and anarchism's Bakunin was "a struggle between the ideas of order and anarchy."[10] Marx, on his side, believed in "organized systems" for power, whereas Bakunin "rejected all authority . . . in favor of individual freedom, total and uncontrolled."[11] And while it is again tempting to see the Joker in the idea of "uncontrolled" power, he has at various times rejected some authority but not his own, reserving the power to guide the masses along his preferred path. Marxism saw the need for "an overwhelming dose of coercion to achieve socialism,"[12] particularly in the middle stage Marx and Engels imagined between the downfall of the ruling class and the abolition of all classes. There is no question that leaders who embraced and then bent Marxism, such as Lenin and Stalin, were keen to rule during that middle stage. DiScala and Mastellone have characterized Lenin as an authoritarian who centralized the Communist Party's structure and opposed anarchism on the way to a "one-party state."[13] Stalin then "combined in himself the single-party system" while being "a leader who violently eliminates all internal opposition."[14] Again and again in such descriptions does the shadow of the Joker fall, as he, too, centralizes the opposition to the established order—in himself—and wipes out anyone, good or bad, who opposes his ideology.

Of course, no single explanation can be applied to the entirety of Batman lore, where the Joker as well as Batman have undergone numerous interpretive and narrative changes. With documents spanning more than seventy

years an d m ultiple a uthors—in f orms in cluding c omic b ooks, n ewspaper comic str ips, an d film and t elevision a daptations, b oth live-action an d animated—there is no single consistent narrative on which to rely. Will Brooker, trying t o esta blish " key c haracteristics" o f B atman, n onetheless c onceded that those characteristics were "a raft to cling to before embarking on sixty years during which the Batman undergoes so many transformations, and is subject to so many competing, often contradictory interpretations, that any defining essence sometimes seems eroded."[15] As a result, my argument may seem scattershot. It nevertheless offers not a single explanation for the Joker but one that has arisen at several significant points along the Joker history. Nor will I argue that the many authors of Batman stories were intentionally creating Marxist allegories. Alan Moore, for all the influence that his *The Killing Joke* (1988) had on Batman mythology, later denied any great significance in his st ory. In deed, h e th ought it "p ut far t oo m uch m elodramatic w eight upon a character that was never designed to carry it."[16] Referring to others of his works, Moore added:

> At the end of the day, *Watchmen* has something to do with power, *V for Vendetta* was about fascism and anarchy, *The Killing Joke* was just about Batman and the Joker—and Batman and the Joker are not really symbols of anything that are real, in the real world, they're just two comic characters.[17]

Considering that Moore's Joker is formed from an abused member of the underclass whose supposed madness derives from several failures of the social system, Moore either missed or ignored his message.

Of course, Batman has been subject to numerous interpretations over the years in print and film which may have surprised the productions' creators, such as the notorious Fredric Wertham's contention in 1953 that the Batman-Robin relationship was "like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together."[18] Nor is th at the only example of a c omic book being assigned meaning when their intent may be innocuous. Donald Duck comics have been called "imperialist ideology," propagandizing to countries like Chile with an American dream in which, for example, Donald has no trouble finding employment while "the real life worker searches desperately."[19] Umberto Eco saw in Superman (and all similar characters, including Batman) a distinctly capitalist bent where "the only visible form that evil assumes is an attempt on private property."[20] The Joker lends himself, in at least some presentations, to a Marxist perspective—especially when one looks at some of the most important works about the Joker and Batman, going back to the creation of the Joker himself.

Even before his transformation from petty crook to Clown Prince of Crime, the Joker understands that Batman's world is in many respects an open sewer. For example, while still the criminal Jack Napier in Tim Burton's film, he listens to the mayor's speech and concurs: "Decent people shouldn't live here. They'd be happier somewhere else."[21] Richard Reynolds, for one, sees in the Batman villains "sketches of various types of madness" in "a world which refuses to make sense."[22] While this creates an opportunity for financial gain by the underworld, the Joker has seldom seen money or even power as his raison d'etre. He is instead part of the long history of criminals serving political causes, a homicidal terrorist. As Walter Laqueur has observed, the idea of using criminals in revolutionary struggle dates to the early nineteenth century, and the extremist Karl Heinzen wrote in 1849 that "murder, both of individuals and masses, is still a necessity, an unavoidable instrument in the achievement of historical ends."[23] Russian radical and anarchist Mikhail Bakunin argued twenty years later that "the bandit is the only true revolutionary";[24] at about the same time, the "Catechism of the Revolutionist" proclaimed that a revolutionary "has broken every tie with civil order and the entire cultured word, with all its laws, proprieties, social conventions, and its ethical rules."[25]

An additional argument for the Joker's political roots lies in the origin of his face. While several visual inspirations for the character have been claimed, an especially powerful one is the face of Gwynplaine (Conrad Veidt) in Paul Leni's 1928 silent film *The Man Who Laughs*.[26] In his memoir *Batman and Me*, Bob Kane says that Bill Finger had a copy of the Victor Hugo novel which inspired the film in a "photo-play" edition "made from the screenplay," with photos of the movie's smiling, white-faced Gwynplaine.[27] That script may have provided further inspiration for the Joker, not only in Gwynplaine but in the character of a court jester named Barkilphedro (Brandon Hurst), who also has a large grin even though, according to one of the cards in the film, "all his jests were cruel and all his smiles were false."[28] The film points more than once to the excesses of the ruling class and the cruelty of material desire (felt by Barkilphedro and several other characters), with Gwynplaine embodying resistance of those desires. His father is a "proud rebel" who defied England's King James II in 1690. As punishment, Gwynplaine's father is put to death and the boy is turned over to the Comprachicos, traders who traffic in stolen children and surgically "transform them into monstrous clowns and jesters."[29]

The Comprachicos give Gwynplaine a hideous, unchangeable grin, implicitly placing its origin in the corruption and decadence of society, as some

later authors would with the Joker.[30] The grin makes Gwynplaine the star attraction in a traveling show, where this "laughing man" delights the nation's masses; he also fascinates the Duchess Josiana (Olga Baclanova), who received his father's confiscated lands. But when Gwynplaine is about to have his title and lands restored—and Josiana is ordered to marry him to remain on the estates—Gwynplaine rejects all that is offered. Instead, he walks out of the royal court. Aided by the masses fighting royal soldiers bent on arresting him for his defiance, he joins his companions from the traveling show and flees England. Thus, *The Man Who Laughs* sets the stage for the Joker via another mutilated, grinning man who defies the established order and demonstrates its weakness.

"Batman Versus the Joker," the character's first comic book appearance, again finds a laughing man at odds with social order. In the story, the Joker commits a series of crimes against wealthy men, in each case announcing the crime on the radio before he commits it. The first involves the theft of a diamond and the killing of its owner; the second is the theft of a ruby and the killing of its owner; the third is the murder of a judge who sent the Joker to prison. In addition, the Joker kills a mobster after the city's criminal element objects to the Joker's "cuttin' in on our racket."[31] The Joker, after all, is not merely a criminal pursuing wealth, however brilliantly; indeed, in his first appearance he is at odds with criminals and has been for some time, with the comic's narrative saying the death of the mobster will "settle an old score."[32] The Joker is not concerned with picking any side other than his own; he wants to wreck the system in which both sides operate. After all, he could pull off his thefts without killing the owners of the gems, and without announcing to the world what he aims to do. (Announcing his crimes before committing them is a recurring element of Joker stories.) He can easily assume the trappings of power, in that first story disguising himself as the chief of police and hiding in one home in a displayed suit of armor; the latter moment makes the Joker a false knight in contrast to Batman's "dark knight." Moreover, in his first newspaper-comic appearance in 1944, the Joker's crimes are inspired by social symbols, beginning with the sign of a pawnbroker (capital) and leading toward a confrontation with Batman, whose symbol represents "triumphant law and order";[33] the Joker's intent is to prove "the symbol of the Joker wins over that of Batman."[34] Indeed, the Joker's leaving his victims with their faces in grins resembling his own is an ongoing "symbol crime" introduced in his debut and then reused, including in the 1944 strips; he is, in essence, not only showing the futility of the existing power structure but "converting" its denizens by making their faces like his own. Another phase of that conversion

is his demonstration of the futility of chasing capital; in the 1944 strips, he escapes a theater by throwing away money—which the enraptured capitalist spectators attempt to grab, blocking the police as the Joker exits. By the late 1970s, and particularly in the 1980s, the Joker is even more commonly presented as a foe of commerce and property. In "The Laughing Fish" (1978), the Joker mocks the very idea of property by infecting fish around America with a chemical giving them his laughing expression, then insisting that they now have his "unique face" and he should receive a percentage of each fish sale.[35] While he insists that he needs the money "to finance my frankly hedonistic life-style"[36], there has been little evidence that the Joker is a hedonist at all—in contrast to the frequent displays of Bruce Wayne's wealth. Instead, the Joker is demonstrating the absurdity underlying any claim of private possession by showing the extreme to which such claims can go. Indeed, in Burton's *Batman*, the Joker—radicalized from a common criminal in his transformation by toxic chemicals—does not say that his goal is to make money from Gotham City; he urges his old criminal cohorts to "run this city into the ground."[37]

Another telling example in Tim Burton's *Batman* comes when Batman (Michael Keaton) uses his gadgets to rescue Vicki (Kim Basinger) from the Joker (Jack Nicholson). "Where does he get those wonderful toys?" the Joker asks mockingly,[38] affirming the basic difference between the rivals. The Joker, after all, is deliberately lower-tech; later in the same film, he will bring down the Batplane with a long-barreled handgun, underscoring the contrast with the better equipped and by implication more privileged Batman. Not only is Batman also the wealthy Bruce Wayne, he continues a tradition of upper-class heroes. Bob Kane said that his inspirations included Zorro, whose other identity of the "rich, foppish Don Diego" served as the basis for Bruce Wayne being "a bored, wealthy idler and playboy" when not Batman.[39] Bill Finger, with Kane a key participant in the creation and development of Batman, said the name Wayne suggested "a man of gentry," like the early American revolutionary Mad Anthony Wayne.[40] The Depression, during which Batman was created, included several well-heeled crime-fighters, such as the pulp characters the Shadow and the Phantom Detective.[41] Orson Welles, the fourth actor to play the Shadow on radio (in 1937–38), was the first to play his alter ego, Lamont Cranston; his Cranston was "rather leisurely and mild, with careless charm in the more or less English accent still synonymous with a private income."[42] Donald Barthelme, in his underrated satire "The Joker's Greatest Triumph," takes direct aim at the idea of Wayne as a wealthy, property-laden sort for whom being Batman is an evening's amusement.[43]

While the origin of Batman is often discussed in terms of the death of Bruce Wayne's parents, it is important to remember what led to that death: the Wayne parents' determination to hold onto property, in this case Mrs. Wayne's necklace.[44] Matthew Joseph Wolf-Meyer has written that "Batman's primary purpose is one of maintaining hegemonic stability and the position of the upper class, of which Bruce is a part," and that Wayne's motivations as Batman are grounded "in the preservation of the hegemonic order, and particularly one based upon class hierarchies and the privilege of power."[45] Wolf-Meyer further argues that superheroes "are only possible through the production of legal and capital spaces produced by capitalist practices" even if they are "outside of capitalism and commodification."[46] Yet Batman breaks that model, remaining inside capitalism. The success of Bruce Wayne's enormous enterprises frees him to fight crime. As Wayne says in the first Batman origin story, "Dad's estate left me wealthy."[47] Wayne's business knowledge carries over to his mask-wearing activities; no ordinary man is going to have all those toys that amuse the Joker. The first Batman adventure involves his uncovering and understanding an elaborate business scheme.[48] Decades later, in Christopher Nolan's big-screen Batman tales, Wayne's business not only finances his work but builds his equipment; indeed, the first film, *Batman Begins*, concludes with Wayne (Christian Bale) taking financial control of his family's company, while the final film in Nolan's trilogy, *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), pivots on Wayne's loss of his wealth.[49]

Since Batman serves as a defender of capitalism, the Joker is set up as its opponent, time and again. The Joker in Burton's *Batman* also mocks capital-rooted consumerism and pretense when he sabotages Gotham's cosmetics, forcing everyone to confront his or her real face instead of the one hidden by consumer vanity. He further ravages the prized art works in a Gotham museum: when the Joker rejects and vandalizes the old masters, he is not just attacking art, but all old masters. That film also includes a variation on the 1944 comic strips' degrading the pursuit of capital; Nicholson's Joker tosses money away in order to attract a greedy crowd, into which he then releases poisonous gas. And Burton was following the lead of print efforts like *The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Killing Joke*, whose suggestions of class war I have already noted. Indeed, the Joker origin story in *The Killing Joke* has the man who is not yet the Joker longing for "enough money to get set up in a decent neighborhood" but unable to find a job in that society's economy.[50] He also learns that his pregnant wife has died because of an electrical short in a baby bottle heater, suggesting the failure of commerce and industry. Turning to crime as a last resort (and disguised as a criminal all too aptly

known as the Red Hood), his mutilation by factory chemicals gives him the physical appearance of the Joker, while this series of capital-driven disasters has given him a cause, however unaware Moore may have been. The existing social order—especially its demand for capital to ensure its survival—has given Bruce Wayne wealth and privilege but the Joker only poverty and despair. Pursuit by Batman leads to the Joker's transformation, making explicit that Batman/Bruce Wayne and their upper classes have caused the Joker's rage.

A Death in the Family adds more fuel to the Marxist-Joker fire, as the Joker accumulates capital but does not cling to it in the way Bruce Wayne has; in *A Death in the Family*, his cruise missile sale is "the only way I can think of to safely replenish my severely depleted funds."[51] The Joker is keen on demonstrating the futility of the system, not only in Gotham City but throughout the world order; one scheme finds him trying to wipe out the United Nations. He, like Gwynplaine, reflects Marx's declaration in an 1843 letter that he lives in a society where "everything is being forcibly repressed . . . [and] stupidity itself reigns supreme,"[52] and the response must include a "ruthless criticism"[53] or, in even more Joker-like translation, a "reckless critique"[54] of everything that exists, with "reckless in the sense that the critique is neither afraid of its own results nor of conflicting with the powers that be."[55] One DC executive's claim about the randomness of crime notwithstanding, the Joker is far from random in many of his efforts to achieve the "abolition of private property" and dismantle the system in which such property (notably that amassed by the likes of Bruce Wayne) is so prized.

The Joker remains not only *the* villain for Batman but a continuing means for addressing the failure of Batman to maintain order in society. *Batman: Impostors*, for example, features legions of "Jokerz" against "guardian bats" costumed like their respective inspirations; as Jokerz and the bats engage in open, mass combat, their leader tells Batman this is "your Gotham. . . . Welcome to Hell!"[56] In the comic book tale "The Man Who Laughs," the Joker unleashes homicidal maniacs into Gotham City, spreading terror in the streets.[57] While the Joker fights across a vast social landscape, Batman persists in seeing their conflict as individual in stories like *Batman: Dead to Rights*.[58] Jim Gordon notes in that story that the Joker (a new-to-Batman villain in that tale's chronology) commits "assault, kidnapping, murder . . . just senseless violence" and wonders, "What the hell did he do it all for?"[59] Batman, having just arrested the Joker, ignores the fundamental question; instead, he says the Joker "can't hurt anyone else. . . . That's all that matters."[60] Unfortunately, Batman is wrong on all counts.

The most important interpretation of Batman and the Joker in recent years is unquestionably the movie cycle of *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises*.[61] From the beginning, writer-director Christopher Nolan couches the power of Batman and Bruce Wayne in terms of money. Upon his arrival in *The Dark Knight,* the Joker (Heath Ledger) is the anti-Batman, not least because he eschews capital and opposes the pursuit of it. The Joker's first portrayed crime is against a mob-owned bank; in the same film, he coldly informs one gangster that "all you care about is money,"[62] and makes a point with his criminal colleagues by burning a stash of their cash. Indeed, where Bruce Wayne holds onto his wealth and uses it to support his costumed enterprises, the Joker's attitude is more in keeping with *The Communist Manifesto*'s hatred of property—particularly if it is held by the bourgeoisie.

As has been evident in some previous Joker tales, money is the least of the Joker's interests in Nolan's films; the Joker is instead far more interested in destroying the materialist, ruling-class-dominated system, which he inhabits and Batman protects. The Joker in Nolan's *The Dark Knight* asks the public if Batman "has made Gotham a better place." Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), turned into Two-Face by the Joker, sees the dark light, telling Batman: "You thought we could be decent men in an in decent time. But you were wrong. The world is cruel. And the only morality in a cruel world is chance."[63] That cruel world preceded the Joker, but Wayne's loyal butler, Alfred (Michael Caine), tries to sum up the villain in terms of some separate cruelty: "Some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn."[64]

If burning was all that the Joker had in mind, then we might again turn to the idea of him as an anarchist. However, Alfred fails to see that some of those doing the burning may in fact have a reason. A Marxist would argue that the longing for money is far from logical, and a world where it is paramount should indeed burn. In the same film, the Joker claims to be an "agent of chaos," but in almost the same breath he wants "to show the schemers"—including both criminals and police—"how pathetic their attempts to control things really are."[65] Established power is what he abhors, noting that people do not panic when a gangbanger or soldiers die because that's "all part of the plan"; but when the mayor (that is, a representative of the established order) is killed, "everyone loses their mind."[66] Once again, the Joker is less interested in attacking individuals (as Batman so often does) than institutions and their representatives. Part of the problem may be that the Joker's ultimate goal is not to eliminate order in its entirety but to change who is in

charge of creating and maintaining it; as much as he detests the system in which he operates, his substitute is for all its chaos a system which he, like Stalin before him, rigidly controls. He is skeptical of the masses' ability to control themselves. Again and again, he seems to offer people a choice, but it is an Orwellian illusion of a choice; the Joker has already decided what they will choose—much the way Bane in *The Dark Knight Rises* seems to offer the captive citizens of Gotham City a choice while having already decided their fate. (Bane also continues the Joker's practice of assaulting capital.) In addition, when the Joker lets Batman choose whether to save Rachel or Dent, he knows that Batman will choose Rachel but gives Batman the wrong addresses for the victims so Batman saves Dent instead—and the Joker can then see further havoc wreaked by Dent as Two-Face.

An even more provocative example lies in the ferry scene and the events around it in *The Dark Knight*, a sequence which may suggest that the Joker has succeeded far more than even he realizes. To be sure, this is another case of the Joker denying people a real choice. While each set of passengers has a detonator for the bomb on the other boat, the Joker has a detonator for both; when neither boat blows up, the Joker gripes that he "can't rely on anyone these days"[67] and attempts to blow up both boats. Given the Joker's history, if one boat had blown up the other, he likely would have detonated the bomb on the other vessel anyway. That, after all, would further force the masses to recognize that they are trapped in a dystopia where their nominal protectors, including Batman, cannot shield them from real harm. Once again, it is not about killing Batman but killing his system. When the system is destroyed, Batman is no longer necessary.

Although the Joker does not complete his own aim of guiding the masses into a new order, he does at least manage to show how the system is in perilous shape as *The Dark Knight* ends. No one's proper role is recognizable: a police officer contends another cop cannot be trusted—when she is untrustworthy herself; Harvey Dent, though operating as a villain, will be passed off as a hero to the public, while the true hero, Batman, has become a villain; the roles of captors and hostages are reversed. For that matter, democracy itself has failed on the ferries; although the citizens on one ferry vote to blow up the other boat, the vote is meaningless because no one is actually willing to use the detonator. And all this occurs after Batman and others have taken extreme measures to stop the Joker. Indeed, one critic has asked if the methods used against the Joker make the argument for "a security state that . . . is obliged to torture its prisoner and spy on its own citizens in order to prevent terrorists [in this case, the Joker] from wreaking destruction."[68] The Joker

has not just wanted to watch the world burn, as Alfred argues. He has seen the punch line of Alfred's story, that to get rid of a single bandit, an entire forest was burned. To get rid of the Joker, a society tore itself apart and then hid the pieces. While *The Dark Knight Rises* suggests that a lone hero can restore balance to a society too dependent on money and lies, it does so with a pro-capitalist notion—that the world needs more rich, benign Bruce Waynes, along with Batman. The Joker, and Marx, would reject such a notion out of hand—and the Joker has again and again tried to prove that such thinking is folly.

Notes

My thanks to Dr. Hillary Nunn of the University of Akron for critiquing both a previous paper on Batman, capitalism and Marxism, and this current effort.

1. Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 2002; 1986), 41.
2. Ibid., 41.
3. Batman first appeared in *Detective Comics* #27 (May 1939), in a story called "The Case of the Criminal Syndicate." *Batman* as a separate publication premiered in the spring of 1940 and included the story "Batman vs. The Joker," written by Bill Finger, with art by Bob Kane and Jerry Robinson. See *The Batman Chronicles, Volume 1* (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 1.
4. Michael Green and Denys Cowan, *Batman: Lovers & Madmen* (New York: DC Comics, 2008), 2.
5. Anthony J. Kolenic, "Madness in the Making: Creating and Denying Narratives from Virginia Tech to Gotham City," *Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 3 (2009): 1024.
6. *Batman*, directed by Tim Burton (1989; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2008), Two-Disc Special Edition DVD.
7. David Hine and Scott McDaniel, *Batman: Impostors* (New York: DC Comics, 2011), 29.
8. Ibid., 54.
9. David McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 232.
10. Saul K. Padover, *Karl Marx: An Intimate Biography* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 401.
11. Ibid., 402.
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13. Ibid., 152.
14. Ibid., 154.
15. Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001), 39.
16. Gary Spencer Millidge, *Alan Moore: Storyteller* (New York: Universe, 2011), 138.
17. Ibid., 139.
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19. Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in The Disney Comic* (New York: International General, 1975), 73.
20. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979), 123.
21. *Batman*, Two-Disc Special Edition DVD.
22. Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 67.

23. Walter Laqueur, ed., *The Terrorism Reader: A Historical Anthology* (New York: Meridian, 1978), 55.
24. Ibid., 66.
25. Ibid., 68.
26. Writer Ed Brubaker and artist Doug Mahnke used the same title for a Batman/Joker story in 2005 about the first combat between the Joker and Batman; it includes some supporting-character names and other elements from the first Joker story in *Batman* #1. See: Ed Brubaker, Doug Mahnke, Patrick Zircher, and Aaron Sowd, *Batman: The Man Who Laughs* (New York: DC Comics, 2008), 8–71.
27. Bob Kane, with Tom Andrae, *Batman & Me* (Forestville, CA: Eclipse, 1989), 105.
28. *The Man Who Laughs*, directed by Paul Leni (1928; New York: Kino Video, 2003), DVD.
29. Ibid.
30. Although the source of the Joker's grin was not established in his debut, a recurring explanation is that it resulted from a fall into a factory's pool of toxic chemicals, which places the harm at the feet of indifferent industry; the comic book tale "The Man Who Laughs" emphasizes the corporate evil by noting that environmentalists claimed the deadly factory had been polluting the harbor—but the employees were more eager "to put food on the table for their kids" (Brubaker, 47).
31. Jerry Robinson, Bill Finger, and Bob Kane, "Batman vs. the Joker," in *The Batman Chronicles, Volume 1* (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 144 (originally published in *Batman* #1, Spring 1940).
32. Ibid., 145.
33. Bill Finger and Bob Kane, *Batman: The Dailies, 1943–1946* (New York: Sterling, 2007), 85 (originally published on April 4, 1944, in daily newspaper strip).
34. Ibid., 86.
35. Steve Englehart, Marshall Rogers, and Terry Austin, "The Laughing Fish," in *The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told* (New York: DC Comics, 2008), 73–74 (originally published in *Detective Comics* #475, February 1978).
36. Ibid., 73.
37. *Batman*, Two-Disc Special Edition DVD.
38. Ibid.
39. *Batman & Me*, 44.
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46. Ibid., 188.
47. "Dirigible of Doom," 63.
48. Bill Finger and Bob Kane, "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate," in *The Batman Chronicles, Volume 1*, 9 (originally published in *Detective Comics* #27, May 1939).
49. *The Dark Knight Rises*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2012; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2012), DVD.
50. Alan Moore and Brian Bolland, *Batman: The Killing Joke: The Deluxe Edition* (1988; New York: DC Comics, 2008), 6.
51. Jim Starlin, Jim Aparo, and Mike DeCarlo, *Batman: A Death in the Family* (New York: DC Comics, 1989), n.p. (originally published in *Batman* #426–429, December 1988–January 1989).
52. Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 7.
53. Ibid., 8.

54. McLellan, 36.
55. Ibid.
56. *Batman: Impostors*, 113–14.
57. Brubaker, 6–71.
58. Andrew Kreisberg and Scott McDaniel, *Batman: Dead to Rights* (New York: DC Comics, 2010).
59. Ibid., 8.
60. Ibid., 8–9.
61. *The Dark Knight Trilogy: Ultimate Collector's Edition* (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2013), Blu-ray.
62. *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2008; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2008), DVD.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid.
68. Chris Fujiwara, "Empty Symbols." *Undercurrent* 4 (2008), n.p.

III

THE DIGITAL JOKER

NEVER GIVE 'EM WHAT THEY EXPECT

The Joker Ethos as the Zeitgeist of Contemporary Digital Subcultural Transgression

by Shali Manivannan

Introduction

Since his Bronze Age revision, the Joker has consistently served as an archetypal trickster, alternating between clever, nonviolent whimsy and vicious malice. Like mythological trickster figures, he is well versed in social engineering, stagecraft, pranks, and idiomatic verbal humor, employing each to maximize his sense of *schadenfreude*. Trickster's behavior arguably typifies the Joker ethos. Tricksterism subsumes lighthearted mischief, carnivalesque inversions of hierarchy and cultural binaries, the demarcation of cultural boundaries through their violation, and clever, innovative humor ranging from playful to malicious. It is regularly conflated with evil, as the dichotomous morality of monotheism obscures trickster's critical ambivalence. He occupies a third space between good and evil, using *a*moral instead of *im*moral actions to destabilize our social and emotional equilibrium and thereby illuminate cultural, political, and ethical ambiguities society may prefer to hide or ignore.[1]

Stereotypically regarded as a monomaniacal personification of chaos, anarchy, and immorality, the Joker is easily reconceived as an exemplary trickster. He evolves from prankster to seeming psychopath but continually embodies ambivalence. His humorous, violent actions remind us that all supposedly civilizing structures exist through the often-violent act of exclusion and that adherence to their rules obstructs creative plenitude. Like trickster, the Joker appears on thresholds as an amoral force that introduces the possibility of movement between the articulated components of stagnating hierarchies and systems of divisions.[2] He particularly interrogates dichotomous morality,

egotism, and trust relationships, especially with those in power. Additionally, he does so without differentiating between mischief and malice, presuming the ends will justify the means.

This insistence on exposing the contradictions and arbitrariness of sociocultural codes links the Joker ethos to contemporary radical change-agents who adopt similar tactics in resisting co-option by the dominant culture. Thus, the Joker's brand of tricksterism grounds characteristics of contemporary digital subcultural transgression. Trolling refers to actions that disrupt another's emotional equilibrium. The success of trolling is measured in lulz, which refers to a cultural stance and linguistic practice based on inducing outrage, defensiveness, humiliation, and confusion by accurately anticipating and exploiting others' insecurities and weaknesses.[3] As the central organizing logic of bulletin boards like the imageboard 4chan, lulz seems to imitate the Joker's tricksterism, seeking to transcend conventional rules of engagement, disturb restrictive order, create social disjuncture, and above all take pleasure in provocation. Like trickster, trolls reveal the arbitrariness of social structures and perpetuate online culture in doing so; like Joker, trolls deny motive or catalyst for their actions, instead citing the rhetorical defense, "I did it for the lulz." Thus, in understanding the Joker ethos as a form of tricksterism, we may rethink digital subcultural resistance in the same terms.

In order to provide a framework for examining the Joker's tricksterism, I will first discuss tricksterism in the context of folkloristics. Subsequently, I will analyze representations of the Joker that illustrate the range of trickster positions he assumes, including *Batman* #251,*Batman* #451,*Batman: The Killing Joke*, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, *The Dark Knight*, *Joker*, and *Batman: Digital Justice*. Finally, I will extend the Joker ethos to the logics of 4chan—/b/.

For Finesse Players Only: A Folkloristic Overview of Trickster

The Joker is best summarized as a "finesse player," able to assess and opportunely exploit situations and individuals to his advantage through combinations of deceptive rhetoric, humor, and unanticipated violence. Trickster's cunning intelligence enables him to dominate those who lack it, such as Croc or the Penguin in *Joker*.[4] In mythology, this "finesse player" is trickster, the culture hero who clarifies ethical behavior through deceptive speech, disturbs established regimes of truth and property, and teaches individuals how to behave. He is an ambiguity that transcends binaries like good/evil and sacred/

profane. He creates boundaries by transgressing them and reorganizes the social sphere by randomizing division lines, redistributing and decentralizing power, and revealing the flaws in dominant cultural logics.[5]

This finesse playing—a combination of keen perception and timely, appropriate action—enables trickster to evade or overturn the codified set of external conventions that structure society. Likewise, the Joker's potentially apocalyptic disruptions appear when systems or ideologies become too rigid to sustain cultural renewal, such as demarcations between sanity and madness, beliefs in personal invulnerability, total reliance on technology, or our faith that safety exists in following the rules.[6] The Joker ethos bears the imprint of trickster praxis. Correspondingly, a brief analysis of trickster should provide a helpful heuristic for understanding Joker's actions.

According to mythographer William Doty, myths reflect and re-conceive social manifestations of civilizing, ordering institutions and codes.[7] Trickster embodies "moral qualities that are the antipodes of expected behavior" through inversions of hierarchy and breaches of morality that alternate between affirmation and upheaval of normative social order.[8] Trickster highlights socioeconomic disparities, as in Hermes's recurrent playful subversion of his brother's lofty, undisputed authority, or Raven's noble thievery of water and daylight from the heavens. While apparently "for the lulz," trickster's actions always benefit culture, whether intentionally or accidentally. He disseminates the tools and knowledge of the upper echelons, as in Coyote's or Prometheus's bestowal of fire on mankind or Legba's gift of magical, medical charms to human shamans.[9] He reveals the deceitfulness inherent to all nomizing social institutions. According to anthropologist Paul Radin, he is creator and destroyer, deceiver and deceived, amoral in that he knows neither good nor evil but catalyzes both, as he is driven by his shameless, deceptive, insatiable nature, not by ethical impulses.[10] As such, he is necessary for cultural robustness, even though dichotomous morality mistakenly condemns his transgressions as evil.

Folklorist William Hynes compiled a matrix of six characteristics that accurately map trickster's persona. According to this heuristic guide, trickster is ambiguous and anomalous; deceiver and trick-player; shape-shifter; situation-invertor; messenger and imitator; and sacred and lewd.[11] He expresses ambiguity in evading restrictive definition and transgressing cultural and epistemological boundaries. This enables him to redistribute or remove division lines, as in Hermes's promotion of himself to Olympian status through the symbolic sacrifice of stolen sacred cattle. Although trickster is the cause and facilitator of disorder, he is just as often inadvertently his own victim, as

when Loki is caught in the salmon-trap he invents. Even so, trickster's deceit illuminates contradictions within the social sphere. Significantly, the victim or success of the trick matters less than the trick-playing act itself. Trickster's bodily appearance is fluid, as he adopts disguises, physically morphs, or otherwise engages in identity deception, such as Raven's ability to become a cedar leaf and impregnate the chief's daughter when she consumes it. He is able to overturn any situation or ideology by inverting binaries and upending systems of control, as in Loki's murder of Baldr, the underhandedness of which is directly proportional to Freya's attempt to fight contingency with exaggerated control. Trickster mediates boundaries by breaking central taboos, though he does not always share the fruits of his labor. Finally, he is marked by his creative, generative capacity for improvisation, frequently turning to wit and wordplay to diffuse his victims' anger with "crafty laughter."[12]

The Joker satisfies several of these heuristics. He is always ambiguous and anomalous, compelling his fellow criminals to read potential duplicity and double meaning into his words. He eludes precise definition, recreating his persona daily. His ability to disconcert, disrupt, and transgress reveals anarchy, danger, deceit, and arbitrariness in spaces of order and safety: asylums, private homes, digital security systems, and executive staff rooms. However, he is also frequently a victim of his own hubris, often overlooking a crucial detail that inevitably leads Batman to him. His appearance is fluid, ranging from chemically dyed skin to grease paint, lipstick, and hair dye to facial scarring. As provocateur and saboteur, he is able to overturn any scheme or hierarchical system of power and transgress the metaphysical lines between good and evil and sanity and madness. Finally, he is an inventive bricoleur, boundlessly creative in his quests for gain and retribution.

However, the Joker ethos differs from that of conventional trickster figures in its emphasis on *schadenfreude*. Where trickster's actions are always democratic and communal, the Joker tends to act only when he stands to benefit. He remakes the truth on his own terms to satisfy his own needs, particularly regarding property, theft, and deceit. His mediations are self-serving deceptions that largely contest the local truths propounded by Batman: namely, that society's hierarchies, rules, and systems of division have been productively formulated. This focus on *schadenfreude* is in keeping with the ethos of trolls on the bulletin board 4chan, a uniquely anonymous and ephemeral imageboard that houses fifty themed discussion boards and produces much of the web's memetic content, such as lolcats, rickrolling, and Internet linguistics.[13] 4channers' trolling behaviors evince the farcical, spectacular, aberrant, creative, and malicious dimensions of the Joker's tricksterism.

Lulz is the primary capital on 4chan's Random—/b/ discussion board, where discussion topics are literally random and ungoverned. While the definition of lulz has become internally inconsistent, 4channers' lulzy actions on /b/ most closely recall the Joker ethos due to the indefinite and variable agendas of its perpetrators and emphasis on deception and cultural renewal, frequently in the form of memes, parodies, and textual and visual remixes.

Positioning the Joker ethos as the zeitgeist of digital subcultural transgression extends this enquiry beyond the rhetorical and mythological. It also lends credence to the notion that modern tricksters can exist within monotheistic cultures and suggests that the Joker's influence may have expanded from comics and fan culture to contemporary resistive practices. To support this idea, I will deconstruct particular representations of the Joker that depict tricksterism as an ambivalent, subversive means to *schadenfreude*.

Just Ahead of the Curve: The Joker as Trickster

Each of the Joker's iterations demonstrates the range of trickster positions he occupies, beginning in *Batman* #1, where his homicidal impulses are characterized as whimsical, brutal, and inscrutable to others.[14] Defanged by self-censorship and the Comics Code Authority in the 1950s, however, he was reduced to nonviolent caprice. After committing a rookie mistake during a heist—infamously dubbed "boner of the year" by Gotham's media—he vows to redeem his criminal reputation not through violence but through a series of crimes creatively patterned after historical blunders.[15] Notably, his goal to acquire immeasurable wealth is self-serving even though the nature of his crimes, like those of conventionally democratic tricksters, are playful and premised on wordplay. Furthermore, the artwork depicts him as embarrassed or hysterical rather than menacing. Even his arsenal is comprised of gag weapons like exploding cigars and other pranks that pose more of a nuisance than a threat.[16]

After a brief disappearance in the 1960s, the Joker reemerged as an erratically violent menace in *Batman* #251, wherein he exhibits clear signifiers of tricksterism. Here, the Joker's trademark grin is often shown in close-up, his eyes narrowed and eyebrows maniacally arched, as he searches for his betrayers. His renewed fierceness is underscored in a panel juxtaposing his visage beside a shark's maw, two similar rictuses.[17] However, his tone remains deceptively humorous, nonchalant, and indulgent alongside vicious imagery. For instance, he gives a cigar to an ex-henchman as a show of goodwill, and the

henchman, thinking he has cunningly perceived the Joker's trick, assumes it is a gag cigar: a fatal inference, as the cigar contains nitroglycerin.[18] Joker's literality here obfuscates the instructive aim of tricksterism, as the lesson—presumably pertaining to trust and complacency—cannot be absorbed by the dead man. By contrast, when he later has Batman at his mercy, he lets him live, famously understanding that the objective is the game itself, not victory. Finally, in trickster fashion, he is thwarted by his own choice of battlegrounds: the oil-polluted beach where he slips during his escape.[19] Thus, he exhibits trickster traits that are simultaneously lighthearted, potentially monstrous, and geared toward *schadenfreude*.

Rigid social binaries of sanity/madness are also complicated in the Joker's reemergence. When Batman accuses Joker of being hopelessly insane, the disjuncture between those words and Joker's goal to highlight invisible social constructs, such as measuring insanity against normative social morality, becomes exceedingly apparent. Trickster's anti-normative behavior often appears to be madness but may be recast through Foucault's view that madness is the ultimate rejection of restrictive social definition and rules.[20] Likewise, the Joker's behavior serves as the ultimate evasion of cultural codes. As *Batman* #251 hints, trickster's madness is not the product of a damaged mind but activity demarcating a space free from social constraint.

This view of trickster madness is explicitly taken in *Batman* #451, where the Joker experiences an existential crisis—a phase of being constrained by the individual problems typically managed by social institutions, such as fear, pain, anguish, and self-doubt—resulting in a loss of trickster finesse. In his absence, a false Joker appears: "yuppie Wall Street wizard" Curtis Base, who inverts hierarchies by assuming a criminal identity.[21] Like the rituals of carnival, a confined period of time during which such inversions were officially sanctioned to release social tension, trickster turns the world upside down to initiate a temporary escape from social constraints; madness, on the other hand, may be seen as a cunning way to permanently escape.[22] Base declares himself the superior Joker because "insanity prevents [the real Joker] from being a success," and he himself is "quite sane"; however, by clinging to the binary of sane/insane, itself a rigid, civilizing cultural code, he proves himself incapable of truly escaping.[23] Recognizing this, the real Joker is able to renounce the fears and anxieties perpetuated by institutions of power as mechanisms of control; he properly resumes his criminal role, after which he is pronounced mad and committed to Arkham Asylum. Thus, the Joker's madness is equated not with a clinical diagnosis but with the total rejection of normative reason and morality. Importantly, Curtis Base fails to achieve

that status due to his profound misunderstanding of the Joker ethos. He is relentless in his desire to kill Batman, focused on the goal rather than the process. He is also unwilling to fully surrender his yuppie identity. By contrast, the Joker has no fixed, socially regulated persona to offset his criminal identity. In reclaiming this identity, he emphasizes means and not ends. In this scene, he extorts a criminal for information about Base, then reassures him with a cigar. The criminal panics, assuming it contains nitroglycerin. As the Joker walks away, he confidently muses, "Ordinary cigar. Never give 'em what they expect."[24] The panel perspective echoes its *Batman* #251 referent, underscoring the Joker's tricksterism as a primary source of his power: that is, his cunning, unpredictability, and ability to anticipate, exploit, and thwart his opponent's anticipation.

The Joker's tricksterism is especially evident in *The Killing Joke*, where the Joker is constructed through acts of doubling, reflexivity, and refraction, rendering visible trickster signifiers. Flashbacks are signaled in reflections, broken concentric ripples, and the twinning of figures, postures, and backdrops. The title itself is ambiguous, suggesting a joke about killing or a joke that literally kills. The dialogue is disorganized and initially eschews rational order, as in the framing device, "There were these two guys in a lunatic asylum": first juxtaposed with Batman and a false Joker and later revealed as the joke that allows Batman and the real Joker to experience a moment of strange camaraderie, interrogating the boundary between law and criminality.[25]

Significantly, the comic's entire premise is disruption through trickster-esque *schadenfreude*. Like Eshu or Legba playfully ruining lives, the Joker attempts to induce madness in Jim Gordon by staging "one bad day," paralyzing Barbara Gordon and caging Gordon himself at a whimsical, horrifying carnival where he is forced to witness images of her injury.[26] The use of the carnival is noteworthy given that it is trickster's domain, a sanctioned and clearly contained site where rules are briefly suspended to reinforce the status quo at carnival's end.[27] The Joker philosophizes about the arbitrariness of social control mechanisms, arguing that a mad world necessitates the denial of reason.[28] However, he contradicts himself through his own susceptibility to reason and memory, as his own past is woven into the present action. Moreover, although he verbally promotes madness, he is visually portrayed in defined, ordered lines, with clear eyes and a grin teetering between comical and innocent. His homicidal tendencies are jovial in tone and antipodal to expectations: his Joker Venom is delivered through a hand buzzer, and the flower in his lapel squirts acid. His stagecraft recalls trick-playing and disguise, as he costumes himself as a Hawaiian tourist before shooting and photographing

Barbara. He invites freak-show workers to gape at the imprisoned Gordon, inverting ordinary/abnormal and authority/criminality binaries much as he interrogated that of sanity/madness. He only fails to triumph because, in trickster fashion, he is victim of his own gag: his gun, out of bullets, emits a flag.[29]

Schadenfreude is the means, but the Joker's ultimate goal is to highlight arbitrary social disparities. He deflates the unwarranted self-importance of the average man. Where "ordinary" is praised in the normative order, the Joker dismantles this ego-sustaining structure, noting the average man's "deformed sense of values [and] hideously bloated sense of humanity's importance, the club-footed social conscience and the withered optimism [and] its frail and useless notions of order and sanity."[30] He later insists that Batman operates within madness, attempting to force an admission that living and struggling are absurd, evoking trickster's exposure of the flimsiness of the civilizing constructs around which society coheres.[31]

Where *The Killing Joke* presents a Joker whose Job-like suffering motivates his social experiments, *Arkham Asylum* offers a nightmarish Joker who, as chaotic as he seems, is also rational, although his rationale may make sense to him alone. Here, the Joker entices Batman into the asylum over an April Fool prank, manipulating Batman by implying he is gouging out a girl's eyes. His words are arranged nonlinearly in scratchy red lettering that stands out from the page as he describes his sharpened pencil and the girl's eyes, cunningly anticipating that Batman will infer incorrectly.[32] The phrase "April Fool" recurs throughout the graphic novel, conflating lighthearted pranks with the deadly gravity of a nullified social system. Specifically, the asylum is run by the inmates in a carnivalesque inversion, exemplified when the Joker relates a joke about a man whose wife died giving birth, then shoots an orderly in the head at the punchline, theatrically lamenting, "Get it? Oh, what a senseless waste of human life!"[33] The double meaning of his words and actions is trickster's signature, and the juxtaposition of his nightmarish visage with humor that layers abstraction and literality also recalls trickster's knack for overturning expectations.

Additionally, McKean's artwork renders visual the trickster elements of the Joker ethos. Here, the Joker is fluid, hallucinatory and dreamlike in attitude and shape. His hair flows wildly, starkly bright, inexplicably defying wind and gravity. His face, often drawn in close-up, ranges from overshadowed to overexposed, the former intimating violence, the latter suggesting volatility and comical lunacy. His coloration is often stippled or incomplete, as though he is perpetually in the process of disintegration and reformation,

amorphous and evasive as trickster; his figure also frequently bleeds across borders or off the page, literally transgressing boundaries.

Compounding these trickster aspects, the Joker ethos is verbally explicated as such by his psychiatrist, who describes his madness as "super-sanity."[34] Where "sanity" previously suggested acquiescence with cultural codes, the addition of "super" implies that this common "sanity" has been replaced by a superior form, in which perception and processing are completely ungoverned and unconstrained:

> [It is] a brilliant new modification of human perception, more suited to urban life at the end of the twentieth century. Unlike you and I, the Joker seems to have no control over the sensory information he's receiving from the outside world. That's why on some days he's a mischievous clown, others a psychopathic killer. He *has* no real personality. He creates himself each day. He sees himself as lord of misrule, and the world as a theater of the absurd.[35]

As an improviser, trickster constantly has to make his own way, developing his cunning repertoire by appropriating the tricks of others: for instance, Coyote frequently obtains food by imitating other creatures, and the octopus, considered the epitome of cunning by the ancient Greeks, is a master of camouflage.[36] "Super-sanity" thus accords with trickster's fluidity and transgressive capabilities and also positions him as operating under logics that lie beyond society's purview.

This portrayal starkly contrasts with the Joker's depiction in *Batman* #451. As such, *Arkham Asylum* seems to mark a turning point in the Joker's tricksterism in that his insanity is recast as an anti-normative but acceptable alternative to conventional social tactics and cultural codes. Like trickster, he is constantly processing, interpreting, and borrowing from his world in dynamic, visually vibrant, and transformative ways. Notably, the notion of super-sanity itself correlates to digital culture, where individuals are inundated with arbitrarily and chaotically placed material resulting in sensory overload. The Joker's trickster persona thus begins to shift toward a more obvious manifestation of contemporary digital practices, in which *schadenfreude* is renamed lulz.

The Dark Knight and *Joker* best exemplify this by centralizing social engineering, which is a staple of lulzy tactics today. *The Dark Knight*'s Joker sports creased makeup, deep-set eyes, stringy hair, and a Glasgow smile he licks as a tic or for emphasis. He embodies fearmongering and terrorism, his social engineering tactics an equal blend of humor and amorality. He buries a pencil

in a man's head as a magic trick and places a gag grenade in the mouth of a Mafia henchman, recalling the gag cigar of *Batman* #451. He dismisses pain with laughter, providing commentary on his own beatings; he is disconcertedly self-assured; and, like trickster, he alters his history based on his circumstances. He is prone to wordplay and literality, as when he drops Rachel Dawes from a penthouse window when Batman demands he "let her go."[37] He characterizes his ethos in the language of tricksterism and *schadenfreude*, taking great pleasure in "show[ing] the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are."[38]

Much of the film focuses on the Joker's use of tricksterism in his social engineering of Harvey Dent's downfall, and his actions, while apparently mad, are almost pathologically rational, interrogating people's trusting nature. He tricks Batman into saving Dent instead of Rachel, deceitfully switching their locations as he anticipates that Batman would go after Rachel. Later, he convinces Dent of the superiority of the Joker ethos, socially engineering Dent's response by falsely representing himself as lacking schemes and, like Dent, as victimized by schemers. Appearing disguised as medical personnel—a figure of order and authority—he apologizes with apparent sincerity and gives Dent a gun, instructing him to disturb the established order. Intended to persuade Dent, this rhetoric highlights the Joker's trickster-esque penchant for revealing society's moral contradictions. It illustrates his indifference about his own survival, as Dent flips a coin to determine his fate in a moment of pure contingency that apparently excites him. The Joker reminds Batman repeatedly that his rules, anger, and strength are meaningless in the face of this anti-normative attitude. This trickster logic recurs in the Joker's final social engineering experiment, when he pits two boatloads of people against one another. Although neither boat explodes, the tactic succeeds in that it illustrates to the passengers their own complicity in sustaining authoritative systems.[39]

Similarly, the Joker disrupts social assumptions concerning sanity, criminality, and normative social order in *Joker*. *Joker* is told from the viewpoint of the Joker's henchman, Jonny, who tries to emulate him but eventually realizes the Joker is "a disease."[40] The semi-photorealistic art depicts the Joker with ropy scars and dark creases on his face. He is whimsical and oddly paternal. The contrast between such images heightens the impact of his brutal acts, such as flaying a man alive or embedding glass fragments into his fingers as a stealth weapon.[41]

He uses a blanket-wrapped shovel to fool armed pursuers into thinking he is armed, a deceptive tactic akin to trickster's improvisatory skill.[42] He

plays Russian roulette with himself for no apparent reason, underscoring the diminished significance of the life/death binary in his worldview.[43] He is continually contradictory, hinting that he is no stranger to madness while formulating rational, complex plans, depicted surrounded by spilled medication.[44] Shortly thereafter, Jonny recognizes that the Joker never suffered from madness; rather, he is a decivilizing, amoral force being exercised on all of Gotham.[45] Correspondingly, in response to a question posed by the Riddler, the Joker acknowledges that the safest place to hide is "in sanity," a pun that suggests the Joker is not mad and that madness is safer than the normative order that society blindly accepts as sane.[46]

In the end, the Joker expresses disgust at Jonny's inability to finesse and his faith in his own invulnerability. He shoots Jonny in the chin, and Jonny willingly falls to his death after realizing that the disease is "you," incurable, older than civilization itself.[47] This disease may be read as the malicious dimensions of tricksterism—uncontained anarchic inversions and subversions and the desire for *schadenfreude* at all costs—as the Joker is characterized as inherently deceptive, clever and unthinking, charismatic and untrustworthy. Significantly, the second-person address implicates the reader, suggesting we too are capable of such tricksterism and hinting at the existence of modern, politicized tricksters in environments that permit or facilitate such behavior.

While *The Dark Knight* and *Joker* seem most representative of Joker's tricksterism, *Digital Justice* forecasts tricksterism as it transpires in digital subcultures, under the moniker of "lulz." *Digital Justice*'s narrative prefigures the binaries presently surrounding digital culture: material/symbolic, organic/artificial, and online/offline. However, the Joker overturns these dichotomies, rendering their boundaries fluid and intimating that the ethos of digital subcultures can be exported offline. In effect, this portrayal of the Joker suggests that the symbolic order of the online world can remake the material order of the offline world. As in trickster praxis, knowledge is power, deception is rampant, and discrete values and physical forms are open to hybrid combination.

Although it is the seeming anomaly in the Joker's brand of tricksterism, *Digital Justice* is noteworthy in that it is one of the first computer-generated comics and it positions the Joker as a virus: fickle, megalomaniacal, able to replicate, infect, and transgress the boundary between immaterial representation and material bodies. He is portrayed as a grinning mouth on myriad screens; while this appears comical, the servos he controls destroy people grotesquely and graphically. Like Coyote, who lacks an intrinsic nature and acquires his repertoire through imitation, this Joker's fabulations and

adaptations are unending.[48] He is infinitely versatile in a ceaselessly changing world, easily transitioning from embodied criminal activity to infecting Wall Street's computer systems.

He lies about authoring the Joker Virus even while openly admitting he will use it to control Gotham.[49] This echoes media hoaxes by modern tricksters like Joey Skaggs, whose false ad for a canine brothel revealed the irresponsibility of news media, which accepted and broadcast the story as fact.[50] The Joker similarly utilizes modes of dominant power, using his virus to infiltrate and control technologically integrated political and media centers. As shown above, he uses media spectacle to again interrogate the normative social structures dividing law and criminality, noting that if the courts did not hold him responsible, he could not have hacked Wall Street. He pushes the contradiction further by exposing the blindly trusting nature of the media, whose opinions society tends to revere. As the news anchor dismisses the Joker's megalomaniacal claim as a joke, the virus slowly manifests on the screen behind her and her hair changes from blond to green, indicating that the Joker has already taken advantage of that trust to overpower the media. His actions also reveal the instability of institutions of power that are typically presumed indestructible.[51]

Tricksterism also plays a major role in the Joker's battle with Batman. The Joker "edits reality" by deleting the deaths of Batman's parents, noting that memories are equal to identity and that personality is not necessarily distinct.[52] This Joker, more so than his other incarnations, is able to mediate and cross the ontological boundaries separating offline earthly reality from other planes of existence, namely, the Internet. Like Hermes and Coyote, who mediate the boundary between life and death, Joker's existence as pure code allows him to control the Net and influence reality. During his battle with the Batman program, which occurs in machine circuitry, he exerts a direct force on offline reality, merging the material and the symbolic.[53] He even temporarily absorbs Gordon's corporeal cyborg body into the immaterial online world.[54] As Gordon digitizes, he is briefly "caught between realities—part flesh, part pure code . . . then he resolves into something that is neither."[55] This "neither" signifies the third space occupied by trickster, who disrupts and rearticulates cultural codes at the joint where binaries meet and intertwine. As such, these third spaces contain possibilities for reordering the dominant systems of power, introducing categories such as transgender, queer, cyborg, and other forms of hybridity. Cultural longevity, in fact, depends on trickster's revelations, which propel its subjects to cope with differences, contradictions, and flaws in its society.

Although the battle concludes with the deletion of the Joker Virus and the Batman program, the protagonists are ambivalent about this victory, believing that humanity's overreliance on technology could easily resurrect the Joker's vision of the Net. They agree that man and machine are interdependent, but that physically embodied heroes are needed to police future digital threats.[56] This suggests that technology would remain trickster-esque without such policing—namely, the Joker's tricksterism, which forgoes idealism, empathy, and civility in favor of *schadenfreude*. From this standpoint, the immaterial online trickster is a dangerous figure as opposed to a culture hero and cannot coexist with normatively ordering impulses of any kind.

The Joker Virus represents the experience of information processing in media environments with a rapid, incessant, and ephemeral information stream. This is the experience of participating on the imageboard 4chan's Random—/b/ discussion board, which is anonymous, ephemeral, and decentralized. It is the apotheosis of transgressive digital subcultures. It possesses an anti-leader, anti-celebrity ethic that emerges in its trolling practices, which are intended to police communal boundaries and destabilize arbitrary and deceitful frames of reference. While /b/ users have been likened to tricksters, they are more aptly analogized to Joker's tricksterism given their propensity for *schadenfreude*. Like Joker, they seek to expose the flaws in normative power structures, and, in a similar departure from democratic, communal tricksterism, they seem to consider emotional disruption an unavoidable and humorous byproduct of their actions.

The Joker ethos thus poses significant ramifications for cultural production, as 4chan is a prodigious manufacturer of online culture. Accordingly, 4chan bears examination itself as an extreme iteration of transgressive digital subcultures that utilize the Joker's tricksterism as method, goal, and rhetorical defense in resisting dominant institutions of power.

For the Lulz: The Joker's Tricksterism in Digital Subcultures

Anthropologists Gabriella Coleman and Finn Brunton have suggested that trickster praxis is central to contemporary digital subcultures that utilize practices like trolling. Like trickster, these trolls transgress and redistribute boundaries; they challenge established property regimes; they are creative in their communal argot, wordplay, and coding; they may be victimized by their own hubris; and they overturn social and cultural codes, particularly binaries of good/evil, sacred/profane, and proprietary ownership/free content

through obscenity, shock content, and similarly sophomoric conduct.[57] Trolls' proclivities for discursive play mirror trickster's linguistic inversions and refractions, puns, literality, and prolixity, deployed to remind authorities that they are only superior due to an arbitrary hierarchy. Additionally, trolls rely largely on social engineering, the psychological manipulation of others to incite them to divulge information or perform certain actions. In transgressive digital subcultures like 4chan, social engineering primarily constitutes identity deceptions and convincing speeches.[58] Tricksters like Coyote, Loki, and Hermes thus prefigure the ethic of digital transgressors, for whom social cues which emerge through discourse, language play, and deceit are used to deflate the egos of those perceived as needing comeuppance. As such, the social engineering tactics of /b/ users parallel Joker's tricksterism, which grounds the contemporary ideology of lulz.[59]

Created in October 2003, 4chan is the largest English-language imageboard and is uniquely characterized by ephemerality and anonymity. 4chan lacks even the option of registration, and default usernames are "anonymous." Although modifiable, this username is used by over 90 percent of users without the provision of other identifying information. Boards are thematic and designated by a letter within backslashes, as in Random—/b/. Content automatically refreshes and does so rapidly on /b/, which receives 30 percent of 4chan's total traffic of over one million unique users daily. The site lacks an archive, and expired content is irrevocably deleted.[60]

4chan's primary purpose is image sharing and discussion. Post content typically consists of an image and accompanying text comment. As the pinnacle of contemporary online transgression, 4chan's culture is based on offense, suspicion, and unreality. Its offensive content inverts the sacred/profane, irreverently treating normatively serious subjects like rape, suicide, murder, racism, and sexism. 4chan's atmosphere is one of suspicion, as members of the community understand that participation is predicated on the impetus to successfully deceive others. Photographs may be altered and rhetoric manipulated to suggest authenticity; thus, nothing can be taken at face value and all claims must be fact-checked. The notion of unreality depicts 4channers' sense of irony, masquerade, and performance: that is, the severance of normative offline identity from anti-normative online interaction. Effects and causes become dissociated, and content—such as individuals' confessions of offline crimes—is treated as fiction.[61]

These behaviors exhibit the malicious dimensions of tricksterism as practiced by the Joker. In transgressive digital subcultures, trolls describe trolling as both discourse and online eugenics, a rhetorical method for morally

adjudicating behavior. For instance, trolls may ridicule new users for social failures in order to preserve subcultural integrity; offensiveness may also serve to deter newcomers who might skew 4chan's anti-normative nature.

This ethos has been absorbed into /b/'s social and administrative codes and mirrors the Joker's form of tricksterism, which has been adopted as a mainstay of its culture. The Joker flagrantly disregards social rules and cultural codes, such as performances of gender or sexual identity. However, he does this primarily to disrupt others' emotional equilibrium, frequently Batman, but also other figures representative of authority, sanity, and dominant normative power. If tricksterism is to be applied to digital subcultural transgression, it must first be differentiated. The Joker ethos predated and predicted lulz as a form of tricksterism that emphasizes *schadenfreude*. This is particularly significant since this form of tricksterism has achieved prominence in online culture. 4chan—/b/ is notorious for its prolific production of memes, linguistics, and social practices, including the use of lulz—the quantitative yield of outrage or distress from the victim—as a means of "keeping score" with regards to trolling efforts.[62]

This directly recalls the Joker ethos. For instance, *Batman* #451 expressly advocates the dissociation of normative and anti-normative identities to achieve the authentic "super-sanity" of madness. In *Digital Justice*, the Joker is possessed of eugenic tendencies that prefigure the policing functions of lulz on /b/. Power transforms into the decentralized, self-surveilling "hivemind" of the Joker Virus, much like 4channers' mode of self-governance. Additionally, Nolan's Joker uses rhetoric that echoes typical discourse on /b/, and he treats suicide and homicide with equal flippancy. 4channers take up this attitude in revealing hypocritical prejudices in social institutions, often surrounding gender, race, property, morality, and identity, as they oppose the rigid, identity-based, self-oriented atmospheres of mainstream sites like Facebook. Lulz is also derived when others are unable to anticipate and counteract trolling—that is, when they are incompetent finesse players. For instance, users who post threats of suicide expecting sympathy are frequently met with exhortations to do so and broadcast it live. Such requests are also deceptions, however, as posting offline identity factors violates 4chan's emphasis on total anonymity and therefore results in increased trolling. As with the Joker's tactics, lulz is derived when 4channers are successful in fooling or humbling others or teaching them about the fragility of normative social constructs.

Perhaps to that end, 4channers have adopted signifiers of Nolan's Joker in their online visual discourse. Perhaps most relevant to this discussion is the

2012 Aurora shooting, perpetrated during the opening of *The Dark Knight Rises* and discussed in the introduction to this volume. The incident was parodied, mocked, and replicated in memes utilizing dialogue, images, or references to *The Dark Knight*. These and similar images appeared on /b/ in the immediate aftermath of the shooting. As they were emotionally disturbing to outsiders, these images were deemed "lulzy" by 4channers. /b/ users even hoaxed the media with claims that the Aurora shooter was a /b/ user himself.[63] In inversions of normative morality, 4channers called the shooter a hero, posted Heath Ledger's dialogue alongside his photograph, and suggested the shooter was the "real" Joker (Figure 11.2).[64] 4chan's sense of unreality diminishes the severity of the crime itself, and offensive interaction impels the production of this material.[65] However, Nolan's Joker provides an opportunity for social critique: namely, of society's impulse to divide tragedy into victims and villains. By likening the shooter to a hero, 4channers interrogate this dichotomy by using the same binary patterns put forth by the normative order. These memes supplant good/evil and victims/villain by centering the shooter as a hero. In a dualistic system, the only alternative to a thing is its opposite, such that if the shooter is a hero, the victims must be villains. Inverting the binary creates a third space in which a more nuanced consideration is possible, similar to 4channers' trickster practices around large-scale disasters like the Holocaust.

The Joker expression has also been applied to criminals who, by normative standards, are reprehensibly evil. For instance, 4channers circulated an image of Josef Fritzl, an Austrian man who held his daughter in a basement for twenty-four years, during which time he raped her and fathered her seven children. Given 4chan's atmosphere of unreality, it seems unlikely that 4channers genuinely laud Fritzl's actions. Rather, the application of Nolan's Joker signifier to Fritzl's face suggests a recognition of the fact that morally impermissible behavior serves a purpose in testing society's civilizing structures. The Fritzl case questioned the perceptiveness of neighbors and authorities who failed to be mistrusting of the Fritzls despite their suspicious behavior. At the same time, the Joker signifier is frequently found on lighthearted, childhood figures, such as Ronald McDonald. The implication here may be twofold: the recognition that corporations like McDonald's are ethically ambivalent, in contrast to their morally wholesome image, and that all purveyors of innocence are simultaneously their antipode and something "neither," the third space trickster opens between and inside all binaries.

In these and other images, there appears to be the tacit recognition that the Joker ethos represents a profound part of 4channers' routine interactions. His

version of tricksterism provides a means for—albeit in malicious, frequently untenable ways—"jamming with" rather than against dominant systems of power. Contemporary society has moved from power based on external forms of discipline to power based on constant, internalized control, a shift that seems evident in the Joker's evolving disposition. In today's society, the best forms of resistance are those that do not resist or protest but that contest the logics of power by using its own patterns against it, thereby revealing flaws in both content and form.[66] In resisting dominant power, 4channers seem to have taken up Joker's ethos of unpredictably and often maliciously "jamming with" the patterns they oppose, using forms like parody and psychological manipulation that have been co-opted by corporations.[67]

Conclusion

It is noteworthy that lulz tends to borrow from later versions of the Joker ethos, which are more oriented toward chaos, rapid and disorderly information processing, and seem less morally ambivalent in that the visual depictions of the character leave less room for the comical or lighthearted. In essence, the Joker ethos provides a concrete point of entry into a form of tricksterism that not only constitutes "doing it for the lulz" but also encompasses the full range of anti-normative behavior that governs 4chan's /b/. The Joker seeks to destabilize normative social frameworks through morally impermissible trickster behavior. At the same time, his evolution may be indicative of the shifts in resistive tactics necessitated by changes in normative power structures. When his viciousness is more tempered by whimsy, as in *Batman* #251 and #451, his crimes are directly resistive, more closely resembling traditional protest against disciplinary power. By contrast, *Digital Justice* and *Arkham Asylum* straddle the divide between disciplinarity and control, featuring disciplinary institutions such as centralized government or asylums but simultaneously describing decentralization and internalized control. Finally, the Joker's social engineering tactics, as in *The Killing Joke* and *The Dark Knight*, evince an understanding of—albeit untenable—affective pedagogy, or instruction through the physiological experiences of fear, anxiety, and relief, the same control mechanisms used by institutions of power.

Ultimately, the use of Joker's tricksterism by 4channers leads us to a juncture where real, physical bodies are utilizing the tactics of a fictional villain in tactics of resistance. Perhaps the greatest significance of this particular reading of the Joker ethos is the contested tenability of exporting the Joker

ethos beyond the mythopoeic and beyond the contained spaces of carnival, where tricksterism tends to flourish. For both the Joker and trolls, this ethic is exported out of necessity: to show those who are not madhouse inmates that the real madhouse is out there, in the real world.[68] The Joker's purpose, ultimately, is not to triumph over the social institutions he renders transparent; rather, by repeatedly testing Batman and civilizing principles of society, he compels us to reassess the socially structuring activity we take for granted. As such, the Joker ethos viably contextualizes not only lulz on /b/ but also digital subcultural transgression in general in the uses aimed primarily at *schadenfreude*. Viewing the Joker ethos and lulz in this light may fruitfully complicate the debate about the political and resistive uses of lulz in offline contexts, illuminating trolling as fundamentally trickster behavior and instating the Joker's tricksterism as an ethos that goes beyond the world of comics, film, and fan culture.

Notes

1. Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), 9–10.

2. Ibid., 258, 302.

3. Mattathias Schwartz, "The Trolls Among Us," *New York Times*, August 3, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/magazine/03trolls-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

4. Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo, *Joker* (New York: DC Comics, 2008), 57

5. Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 8.

6. Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (New York, DC Comics, 1989); Pepe Moreno, *Batman: Digital Justice* (New York: DC Comics, 1990); *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2008; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2008), DVD.

7. William Doty, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 72.

8. Ibid., 191.

9. Ibid., 360.

10. Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Bell Publishing Company, 1956), 155.

11. William Hynes, "Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide," in *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, Criticisms*, edited by William Hynes and William Doty (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 34.

12. Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 17–47, 105–106.

13. Lolcats are images of cats with superimposed text; the grammar is frequently incorrect, and the speech is nearly always attributed to the cat. Rickrolling consists of a "bait-and-switch" deception in which masked hyperlink addresses lead not to the expected destination but to the music video of Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up."

14. Jerry Robinson, Bill Finger, and Bob Kane, *Batman* #1, Spring 1940 (New York: National Periodical Publications).

15. Bill Finger, Bob Kane, and Charles Paris, *Batman* #66, August–September 1951 (New York: National Periodical Publications), 3–4.

16. David Vern, Dick Sprang, and Charles Paris, *Batman* #73, October 1952 (New York: National Periodical Publications), 73.
17. Dennis O'Neil, Neal Adams, and Dick Giordano, *Batman* #251, September 1973 (New York: National Periodical Publications), 16.
18. Ibid., 251, 6–7
19. Ibid., 22.
20. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2001), 8–9.
21. Marv Wolfman, Jim Aparo, and Mike DeCarlo, *Batman* #451, July 1990 (New York: National Periodical Publications), 5.
22. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Carnival and Carnivalesque," in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, edited by John Storey (London: Prentice Hall, 1997).
23. Wolfman, Aparo, and DeCarlo, *Batman* #451, 19–20.
24. Ibid., 8.
25. Alan Moore and Brian Bolland, *Batman: The Killing Joke* (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 3, 45.
26. Ibid., 38.
27. Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 187
28. Moore and Bolland, *The Killing Joke*, 21–25.
29. Ibid., 43.
30. Ibid., 33.
31. Ibid., 38–39.
32. Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (New York: DC Comics, 1989), 9–10.
33. Ibid., 42.
34. Ibid., 29.
35. Ibid., 29–30.
36. Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 44, 52.
37. Nolan, *The Dark Knight*.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo, *Joker* (New York: DC Comics, 2008), 120.
41. Ibid., 20–22, 96.
42. Ibid., 8–9.
43. Ibid., 49.
44. Ibid., 90.
45. Ibid., 119–22.
46. Ibid., *Joker*, 79.
47. Ibid., 113–22.
48. Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 43.
49. Moreno, *Digital Justice*, 66.
50. Christine Harold, "Pranking Rhetoric: 'Culture Jamming' as Media Activism," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21, no. 3 (2004): 195.
51. Moreno, *Digital Justice*, 66–67.
52. Ibid., 92.
53. Hynes, "Mythic Tricksters," 34–37; Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 40.
54. Moreno, *Digital Justice*, 86–87.
55. Ibid., 90.
56. Ibid., 96.
57. Gabriella Coleman and Finn Brunton, "A User's Guide to Lulzy Media, the Pleasure of Trickery, and the Politics of Spectacle: From Luddites to Anonymous," presentation at the Next Hackers on Planet Earth, New York, NY, July 16–18, 2010.

58. Gabriella Coleman, "Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls: The Politics of Transgression and Spectacle," in *The Social Media Reader*, edited by Michael Mandiberg (New York: New York University, 2012), 115.

59. Given the ephemerality of 4chan's content, all images pertaining to 4chan were retrieved from the author's personal archive, which contains images and threads garnered through nonparticipant observation over a period of eight years.

60. Michael Bernstein, Andrés Monroy-Hernández, Drew Harry, Paul André, Katrina Panovich, and Greg Vargas, "4chan and /b/: An Analysis of Anonymity and Ephemerality in a Large Online Community," *Fifth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media* (2011), 5–6.

61. David Auerbach, "Anonymity as Culture: Treatise," *Triple Canopy* 15 (2012): n.p.

62. Schwartz, "Trolls," n.p.

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65. Auerbach, "Anonymity," n.p.

66. Harold, "Pranking Rhetoric," 209.

67. Ibid., 191.

68. Morrison and McKean, *Arkham Asylum*, 100.

PLAYING (WITH) THE VILLAIN

Critical Play and the Joker-as-Guide in *Batman: Arkham Asylum*

kri Stin M. S. bezio

> I just wanted to bring down your grim façade and let you see the world as I see it. Giggling and bleeding.
> —The Joker

Rocksteady's 2009 video game *Batman: Arkham Asylum* begins with a prototypical ending: when the game begins, the player is shown a cinematic cutscene (in which the player is a passive viewer) that begins in Gotham City while the static-y voice of the police dispatcher says, "The Joker has been apprehended; Batman is now en route to Arkham Island."[1] The scene cuts to a sign pointing the way to Arkham Asylum as the Batmobile speeds past. We see Batman—driving—for only a few seconds before the "camera" shifts to focus on the Joker, bound and semiconscious in the back seat. Batman drives through the gates of Arkham Asylum, and the title, *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, appears before the scene goes black. Already the player's expectations have been challenged; instead of beginning with a crime, the game shows us resolution, "playing" with narrative convention and establishing a sense of confusion and disruption that continues throughout the game. From the very beginning, the player confronts and is confronted by violations of social and institutional order that he must accept in order to progress.[2] Throughout *Arkham Asylum*, the player is compelled to accept directives from the Joker, the one character he assumes he should not obey. In the game, the Joker orchestrates the primary narrative, forcing the player (and Batman) to either "play along" or quit the game entirely. Without the Joker's guidance, the player cannot progress; indeed, were it not for the Joker, there would be no

game to begin with, no experience of the ludic ("fun"), and no recognition of the need for play in the "real" world beyond the asylum walls.

In the sphere of games, play is defined as "an autotelic approach to the world, a way of engaging any variety of activities as ends in themselves."[3] Play is performed for its own sake, and is also how one approaches (or can approach) games. Games are essentially problem sets, mathematically or logically based puzzles in which "we look for a 'solution,' a description of what each player should do and what the outcome should be," explains Morton Davis.[4] According to Chad Carlson, the relationship between play and games is not as simple as we might presume: "Play is only incidentally related to problem solving. Games are built squarely around it. . . . Therefore, although play and games are highly compatible, often experienced together, and offspring of common parents, they are still distinct phenomena."[5] In *Arkham Asylum*, it is the Joker who encourages gameplay: the player faces a series of problems, but solving them should be *fun*. *Arkham Asylum* should be *played*.

The process of play in *Arkham Asylum*, as in most video games, includes both narrative (story) and *ergodic* engagement (interaction which can impact the outcome of, or events within, the game, distinguishing video games from other forms of narrative audiovisual media, such as television or film).[6] The ergodics of a game are dictated by the player's interactions with it—movement, combat, et cetera—and are distinct from, although related to, the game's narrative. Scot Brendan Cassidy explains that video games contain both a narrative and a *ludonarrative*—a sequence of actions based on the gameplay choices of the player, which may or may not influence the narrative.[7] In *Arkham Asylum*, the ludonarrative does not alter the narrative, although it is a part of what makes playing *Arkham Asylum* a ludic experience: in other words, *fun*.

The narrative of *Arkham Asylum* "is a culmination of years of Batman stories, fused together with an original plot penned by Paul Dini, creator of *Batman: The Animated Series*," reports *darkzero*'s Ian Dickenson.[8] In both *Arkham Asylum* and *Batman: The Animated Series*, the Joker is voiced by Mark Hamill, although, Dini explains in an interview with Mike Snider, "just as we rethought the world for the video game, they rethought their roles a little bit and stepped up to give it that extra menace and determination. . . . The Joker is a little more gravelly, a little more manic, a little more hateful."[9] In *Arkham Asylum*, the Joker's role is both villain and game designer—antagonist and author—and, despite claiming Batman as the titular figure (*Batman: Arkham Asylum*), the game is centered narratively and emotionally on the Joker. Snider remarks that "longtime archenemy The Joker is at center stage

in this original story."[10] The Joker's character in *Arkham Asylum* is so compelling that one reviewer, *Impulse Gamer*'s Edwin Millheim, began his review in the Joker's voice:

> Joker here, so the guys and gals at Impulse Gamer are reviewing my game. With a not so special guest star, my old pal Bats. . . . It even gives you a chance to know what it's like to be the bat. Why anyone would want to is beyond me. . . . but it is a fun game . . . and I know fun![11]

Not only does Millheim imitate the Joker's language, but he tellingly refers to it as "my game," and says, "I know fun!" Dickenson provides perhaps the most accurate comment on the Joker's role: "the game becomes an insight into the relationship between the Joker and the Batman, with Joker narrating Batman's movements about the island, toying with him as he goes."[12]

The Joker's narrative control forms the foundation of *Arkham Asylum*, just as the "relationship" between Batman and the Joker has traditionally shaped their characters, as Chris Kohler observes: "Making you feel like the Joker is constantly plotting your demise in some elaborate trap . . . that's what being the Dark Knight feels like."[13] Kohler continues, explaining how, in *Arkham Asylum*, the Joker serves the same purpose for the player: "The game's titled *Batman* but Joker is the central character; he's there in the beginning luring you in, and thereafter constantly on the P.A., taunting you and moving the plot along."[14] By allowing himself to be "lured," the player agrees to follow the Joker's directives, entering into a kind of contract-of-play in which both parties agree to ergodically engage one another. In fact, it is in both their best interests that he does so: after all, there is no point to the game (either the Joker's or Rocksteady's) if the player is unable to advance. It is through this "guidance" that we see the Joker's manipulative power over not only Batman, but over the player's ludic experience of the game.

The narrative of *Arkham Asylum* is highly scripted—predetermined by the developer—and the Joker's role parallels the developer's: he offers Batman control over the ludonarrative, but no control over the narrative, creating a deliberate illusion of agency. The moments of ergodic engagement permitted to the player—when the player-character fights henchmen, glides through the air, examines clues, and so on—establish the feeling of control, when in fact the entire sequence has been scripted. From the player's perspective, this illusion of agency is not only ludic ("fun"), but also facilitates immersion in the game's narrative, a relationship visible in the overlap of player-Batman and developer-Joker; this overlap is where we find the crux of *Arkham*

Asylum's critical engagement with the importance of play to the negotiation of the gamespace of Arkham Asylum and the real-world spaces it allegorically represents. In *Arkham Asylum*, the Joker's influence maps play onto the "work" of gaming, defying rules and restrictions by prioritizing the ludic, but also actively encouraging the player-qua-Batman to relinquish control and just have "fun."

As the designer of the in-game narrative, the Joker relies upon and exploits gaming conventions and *Batman* narrative traditions to create his ludic role. One significant aspect of his characterization is that, as in Christopher Nolan's 2007 *The Dark Knight*, Rocksteady's Joker has no clear origin. Anthony J. Kolenic has argued that the Joker's multiple origin explanations "differ, intentionally on his part, which can be read as simply him furthering chaos, or, perhaps as how that chaos becomes efficacious."[15] In *Arkham Asylum*, Dr. Young asks the Joker about his childhood:

> YOUNG: I thought I'd skip back to our previous conversations about your family.
> JOKER: Of course. I was born in a small fishing village. I always wanted to join the circus, but my father wouldn't really let me.
> YOUNG: I don't believe you.
> JOKER: My father was a cop, one week from retirement when the mob . . .
> YOUNG: I've seen the movie.[16]

The Joker refuses to give a straight answer, and his diagnoses vary similarly: "Every doctor that has ever interviewed you claims a different type of psychosis. Everything from multiple personality disorders to, well . . . the list is endless."[17] In his multiple answers, the Joker "plays" with Dr. Young's questions, exploiting the rules by which she attempts to inscribe him in order to illustrate how "chaos becomes efficacious."

Through the Joker's refusal to be defined by either Dr. Young or the institutionalized understanding of psychosis she represents, he engages in Derridean play, denying the symbolic order of psychiatric practice while disrupting its attempts at categorization. With many possible "substituted" histories, the Joker cannot be compartmentalized by the dry limitations of the understandable—he is uncertain, unpredictable, what Jacques Derrida might call "the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity."[18] As Eric Garneau argues in another of this volume's chapters, the Joker's play is "monstrous" because he provides too many possible origins, too many diagnoses, too much talking, too much color. The glut of possibilities is more dangerous—and more playful—than

none at all because each possibility forces the reevaluation of all possibilities. And yet within the gamespace of *Arkham Asylum*, this same monstrous excess provides the player with a source of ludic engagement; the ability to choose which quests, which collectibles, which paths contributes to the game's "fun," but also to the player's illusion of control. By providing these ludic options, the Joker—as developer and antagonist—perpetuates the illusory agency necessary to both the narrative and to the player's external experience of play.

Play, in this understanding, acts outside of proscribed social rules and normative behaviors, and aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptualization of the carnivalesque, a link made apropos by the Joker's physical resemblance to the clown or fool and his presiding role over the carnival-space of Arkham Asylum. The world of carnival, like Arkham Asylum, is "a 'world inside out'" that contains "giants, dwarfs, monsters, and trained animals," descriptions that apply to the various inmates of Arkham Asylum.[19] Within the boundaries of Arkham Asylum, madness is permissible—as in carnival—because it is institutionalized, and therefore restrained. *Arkham Asylum* (as both game and in-game locale) offers a bounded virtual space in which the player-character is able to enact his ludic fantasies—to become, as the Joker repeatedly remarks, a madman worthy of Arkham's ludic world. Carnival, like gamespace, "does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. . . . Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people."[20] Carnival was associated with games and gameplay even in the medieval era:

> The images of games were seen as a condensed formula of life and of the historical process. . . . At the same time games drew the players out of the bounds of everyday life, liberated them from the usual laws and regulations, and replaced established conventions by other lighter conventionalities.[21]

Gameplay and carnival are interactive, not simply "allowing" participation, but demanding it. The Joker similarly demands Batman's interaction; because of its reliance on ludonarrative, *Arkham Asylum* must manipulate the player-qua-Batman into accepting the Joker's challenge and entering into a contract of play as a participant rather than as a spectator. Such participatory engagement is unique to games and to play because it refuses to permit passive observation; unlike a film or graphic novel, a game—here, a video game—embodies the ergodic complexities of the Joker's varying personae

more fully and more powerfully than the experience of spectating a cinematic text. In *Arkham Asylum*, the player becomes the Joker's subject of ludic experimentation, fully reifying the theoretical underpinnings of his carnivalesque character through play.

Within Arkham Asylum's ludic walls, it is the Joker—not the player-character—who is in control, a situation that is immediately apparent in *Arkham Asylum*. When the doors open, Batman is standing and the Joker is kneeling, seemingly subdued, but laughing maliciously. Batman's comment—"Warden, something's not right. I'm going with him"—establishes this subservience as an act.[22] The Joker is restrained in an upright gurney and wheeled into the asylum, and the player's first ergodic interaction with the game is to follow him. If the player either does not do so or moves off course, the Joker prompts him: "You're not coming, Bats?" and "Hurry up, you'll be late for the party!"[23] The Joker's demands indicate his presumption of control over both the player-character and the game. Batman recognizes this, saying, "You've never let me catch you this easily."[24] The emphasis here is on "let"—the Joker has permitted Batman's actions, just as he will permit the player-character's actions throughout the game. Thus far, the player has been limited to following the Joker and enduring his insults, and when the Joker springs his trap, the player remains helpless; this sense of powerlessness is what creates the opportunity for play.

By refusing player-control, *Arkham Asylum* creates a (false) sense of ludic freedom when the player is finally able to really play the game, but even this "freedom" comes as a consequence of the Joker's explicit orders. The Joker both constructs the challenges Batman must overcome and narrates each encounter through the asylum's PA and via frequent appearances on the asylum's closed-circuit television system, both of which serve as a vehicle for the transmission of his "rules." Miguel Sicart observes that "games force behaviors by rules: the meaning of those behaviors as communicated through the game world to the player, constitutes the ethics of computer games as designed objects."[25] The Joker's rules comprise the ethics of *Arkham Asylum*, and, in order to progress through the game, the player must accept and be willing to play by that ethos, even (and especially) if he doesn't fully understand it.

The first ergodic combat sequence in the game is orchestrated by the Joker, who introduces the enemies in waves. The player and Batman both rely upon the Joker for the production of the narrative, which itself provides the space for this ludonarrative to exist. Similar Joker-coordinated attacks continue throughout the game, and at one point, the Joker says, "I suppose I'd

better warn my boys you're on your way. Hey . . . maybe I won't. It'll be a nice surprise."[26] The henchmen are placed to produce ergodic encounters, which, while under the player's control, are designed by the Joker, who says, "Hey, Bats. I know you can hear me. I want you to hurt these guys. They're nothing to me."[27] Within combat, the player decides whether to dodge, attack, block, throw a projectile, or perform one of several special combat moves, producing the illusion of ergodic play, moments of illusory control bounded by the Joker's script. This ludic illusion is essential to the perpetuation of *Arkham Asylum*'s larger ideology, in which there must be a place for both order and chaos.

Batman is traditionally affiliated with *logos* (law and order), in contrast to the chaos created and embodied by the Joker. The Joker's game is not only aware of, but predicated on the manipulation of, Batman's self-imposed order as a means of forcing him to submit to chaos. Even the player-character's defiance of the Joker through gameplay subscribes to his authority: although the player-character fights to defeat the Joker, he does so only because the Joker encourages it. He taunts the player-character, saying, "Why don't you just come find me?" He assists the player-character's progress by painting arrows and symbols showing the way through the labyrinthine corridors, underscoring his claim that "I'm in control of the Asylum. You're not going anywhere I don't want you to. Understand?"[28]

Before Batman leaves the first building—Intensive Treatment—the Joker forces him to engage in the game's first "boss fight" (a combat sequence with at least one particularly challenging enemy), an encounter attended by the Joker "in person," rather than via television screen. When Batman walks through the doors, the Joker taunts him, saying, "What took you so long?" and Batman counters:

> Batman: There is no escape, Joker. I will find you.
> Joker: I'm counting on it. Just not yet.[29]

The Joker then releases an inmate dosed with Dr. Young's TITAN formula, and the player-character engages the enemy, but is not allowed to complete the fight: control is abruptly wrested away from the player into a cut-scene, during which the TITAN-enhanced inmate suffers a brain aneurism and dies. The Joker exclaims, "Well, that was unexpected, wasn't it? Oh, well! Note to self: need stronger test subjects."[30] He then addresses Batman from the top of the inmate's cage, which is suspended over a very long (probably fatal) fall: "Seeing as how I'm feeling generous, I'll give you this one for free. Knock

figure 10.1 the Scarecrow's world resembles a side-scroller or platformer-style of game, rather than a three-dimensional interactive game world (rocksteady, n.p.).

me off, I dare you! End this! Pull the plug! Stop me once and for all!"[31] He then waits, feet together and arms outstretched in a parody of the crucifix. Batman (still in the cut-scene) pulls out a Batarang, but hesitates, unable to throw it and cause the Joker's death.

This (in)action confirms that Batman needs the Joker in order to secure his own identity as the Joker's antithesis. Recognizing the hesitation for what it is, the Joker laughs, saying, "You're getting so predictable, Bats," before riding the suspended cage back out of the room.[32] Batman's self-imposed rule against killing (which the player-character cannot break) prohibits him from killing the Joker, a rule the Joker both recognizes and exploits. As Davis explains, attempting to maximize one's "winnings" in a game system is often compromised by one's "utility function," a "'quantification' of a person's preferences with respect to certain objects."[33] Batman's utility—his unwillingness to kill—modifies the strategies available to the player-character, but also allows the Joker greater avenues of manipulation because he is aware of this utility. However, the Joker is limited by his own utility: his unwillingness to end the game prematurely. What is particularly interesting in the mixture of these two utilities is that neither Batman nor the Joker ever wants to definitively end the game: the end of the game is the end of play, and it is therefore undesirable to the Joker. As long as Batman refuses to kill the Joker, their "play" will continue, even if this specific game will end.

In order to perpetuate their interaction, the Joker manipulates Batman into adopting governing principles that embrace the ludic over *logos*. Within the space of Arkham Asylum, misrule and chaos are the dominant paradigm, and as Sicart notes, "rules are insurmountable laws the player has to acknowledge and surrender to in order to enjoy the game."[34] The process of surrender permits ludic engagement, and also moves the player-character from the space of order and reason to disorder and insanity. Temporary madness—the entry into the carnivalesque—is necessary for Batman to engage with the Joker's play, evident in the Joker's comment that "we have an escaped patient. Dresses like a bat."[35] This remark illustrates not simply the elision of the boundary between order and chaos, but the larger point that in order to pursue the Joker, Batman must adopt part of his insanity.[36] However, what the Joker manages to accomplish is ultimately only temporary and illusory insanity—a veneer of the ludic overlaying the player-character's rational gameplay. Yet that veneer is enough to produce the player's willingness to temporarily accede control to the game's insanity in order to achieve ludic engagement.

However, the choice to embrace the Joker's ideology of insanity is not left to the player-character's agency. By employing the Scarecrow (and his hallucinogenic compound), the Joker is able to force Batman into episodes of actual—if temporary—insanity. These scenes transition visually from the rooms of Arkham Asylum to scenes depicting the murder of Bruce Wayne's parents, revisiting thematically the psychological trauma of Batman's past. The ludonarrative, too, participates in the alteration of perspective by changing the gameplay during these episodes from over-the-shoulder third person to a more two-dimensional distant perspective, as seen in figure 10.1.[37]

The last of these episodes invades the player's expectations of gameplay beyond both narrative and ludonarrative. When Batman attempts to regain entry into Intensive Treatment in pursuit of the Joker, he reenters the same hallway through which the player-character escorted the Joker at the start of the game. The screen blurs, shows static, and the game appears to "crash," then transitions into a cut-scene. The cut-scene is a reversal of the game's opening sequence: the Joker is driving the Batmobile with Batman tied up in the back seat. They arrive at Arkham Asylum, and the player is thrust into a role reversal in which Batman is bound to the gurney, and the player assumes the Joker as his avatar. Such a reversal "plays" with the player's understanding of his role, requiring him to adopt and play as the villain. In order to progress, the player *must* play as the Joker, reinforcing the idea that the Joker is an essential element of the game: without an opponent, there can be

f igure 10.2 When the sequence begins, the computer or console appears to crash (top), leading to a fake "death screen" (bottom) (r ocksteady, n.p.).

no experience of the ludic, even if that opponent is ultimately a part of the player himself, his own best friend and worst enemy.

Once the player reaches the end of the entry corridor, perspective switches again, and the player resumes the "identity" of Batman, still bound to the gurney. The Joker says, "I've waited a long time for this. Let's start the party. With a bang," holding a gun to Batman's head and pulling the trigger.[38] The player has no option to dodge or free himself, and Batman's sudden "death" is shocking. Immediately, the game's "death screen" (black, with a character—here, the Joker—taunting him for having "died," and containing a "tip" on how to avoid death in the future) appears with the suggestion to use the "middle stick" to dodge the Joker's bullet and the option to either "Retry" or "Quit," seen in figures 10.2 and 10.3, which contrast the "standard" death screen with the "false" one.[39]

Either choice takes him not back to the previous scene or the menu (as would be expected), but to a cut-scene of Batman crawling his way out of a grave. By this point, the player will likely have realized that the preceding sequence is the product of an injection from the Scarecrow. The "crash," "death screen," and change of perspective are all a part of a scripted sequence which functions as a meta-ludic corollary to Batman's experience within the game narrative. Just as the Joker-qua-Scarecrow is manipulating Batman's perception of his experience, so, too, is the game-qua-Joker manipulating the player's experience by "playing" with the conventions of gameplay. The player

f igure 10.3 a genuine "death screen" (r ocksteady, n.p.).

expects the game to remain confined to the on-screen narrative, but here it breaks through the boundaries of gameplay.[40]

This sequence ends with Batman's defeat of the Scarecrow, one of many villains the Joker has placed in the player-character's path, including Killer Croc, Zsazz, Poison Ivy, Bane, and Harley Quinn. Once they are defeated, Batman is invited to the Joker's "party" in the Visitor Center, where, throughout the game, henchmen may be found working on the doors. Gradually, their "work" is revealed to be a funhouse-esque entry through the Joker's mouth—reifying the game-long process of "getting into the Joker's head" when Batman

figure 10.4 the Joker wearing his own image on a television in place of his head, from the final sequence in *Arkham Asylum* (rocksteady, n.p.).

literally walks into a giant representation thereof. Upon entering the Visitor Room, the player-character is confronted by a Joker mannequin with a static-filled television replacing its head. When the Joker begins speaking, his image appears, completing the "body."

This alludes to the Joker's use of the monitors and PA system throughout the game, but is also a physical representation of the player-character's interactive persona: a combination of both a digital avatar (present on a television or computer screen) and the physiological person of the player. The Joker says he has been "looking forward" to this final confrontation, then shouts "Surprise!" as he lifts the television off his own head (the "mannequin" was his "real" body).[41]

At this point, the player-character is given a final objective: "Defeat Joker before he destroys Gotham." The Joker says, "You don't want to miss this. Really. It'll be a blast."[42] As he sets the television down on his chair, he begins a countdown, slowly backing his way out of the visitation area (behind glass where the player-character can't reach him). On "one," the television explodes ("a blast"), and the player-character follows the Joker through the newly created hole in the window, where Batman finds the Joker waiting. When Batman says, "It's over, Joker," the Joker responds, "Over? It hasn't even begun," forcing Batman to face a series of enemies.[43] Throughout the fight and following its completion, the Joker praises Batman: "Nicely done, Bats! You deserve a prize!"[44] The "prize" is Commissioner Gordon, whom the

Joker is about to inject with TITAN when Batman (in a cut-scene) intercedes and takes the dart himself. The Joker's response is gleeful: "We're gonna have some fun now kiddies!"[45] After all, TITAN produces monstrosity and insanity, the two things the Joker spent the game attempting to enforce. During this confrontation, the Joker explains his motivation—to get Batman to forsake his adherence to *logos* and join him in the lawlessness of carnivalesque play: "I just wanted to bring down your grim façade and let you see the world as I see it. Giggling and bleeding."[46]

The Joker then injects himself with TITAN, and although he encourages Batman to join him in monstrosity—"Change, get crazy! It's the only way to beat me!"—Batman refuses and administers the antidote to himself.[47] As the transformation begins, the Joker says, "You can't beat me. I'm actually going to win."[48] However, if he wins, the game is over, and the Joker only has power during gameplay—if he defeats Batman, he has no opponent with whom to play, a relationship evident in their exchange just prior to the final fight:

> Jo KEr : Ready for the next round?
> Bat Man : Always.
> Jo KEr : What?!
> Bat Man : I'll never let you win. Never.[49]

Batman cannot allow the Joker to win because to do so would end the game—both for themselves as players within the narrative structure of the game and for the external player controlling the Batman-avatar. However, if Batman defeats the Joker, Batman's self-imposed rule against killing ensures a future play-transaction for both of them (a sequel). After all, play is only possible if there are rules, reason, and order from which that play allows escape: play without the opposition of order becomes simply chaos, not play at all—the "bleeding" without the "giggling" of the Joker's worldview.

So, when the Joker willingly accepts the effects of TITAN, allowing himself to be transformed into a physical—as well as psychological—monster for the game's final battle, he undermines what he has been attempting throughout *Arkham Asylum*. Under the influence of TITAN, the Joker abandons his position of control and play, entering the arena of ergodic rationality embodied in the player-character's mastery of the game's combat mechanics. Once the final "boss fight" begins, the player-character falls back on the skills he has learned in a predictable combat sequence that falls entirely within gaming conventions. By agreeing to meet Batman on his own terms, the Joker has forsaken the only thing that gave him any power—after all, the Joker's goal

in manipulating Batman is not to destroy Batman, but to force him "to see the world as I see it." By using TITAN, the Joker automatically loses: he becomes what Batman and the player see him as—a monster—instead of showing Batman what it is like to be the Joker.[50] Apprehending the Joker effectively ends both his play and the game, ostensibly also putting an end to the player's interaction with gamespace and returning them to the real world. However, the process of the capture—strapping the Joker into a gurney and readmitting him to Arkham Asylum as a patient—echoes the game's opening sequence that allows for both replay ability and sequels: the promise of continued play.[51]

Games present us, as players, with idealized elements that engage us critically and intellectually, but that are also *fun*—they are both playful *and* critically aware, something Jane McGonigal suggests is lacking in reality: "Compared with games, reality is too easy."[52] *Arkham Asylum* agrees that "reality is too easy," and is therefore no fun. This is how *Arkham Asylum* begins—with the grim reality of the streets of Gotham, institutionalized order imposed through law and psychiatric categorization. But there is no challenge in an ordered world, no critical engagement, no unanswered questions or unexpected surprises (good or bad). This is the argument against hierarchy and *logos*, and the source of the carnivalesque and Derridean play—order without challenge, according to McGonigal, quite simply makes us "bored out of our minds."[53] The problem with boredom is that it produces apathy and complacency. But while McKenzie Wark argues that the constant pressure of gamespace "carries within it the strange ectoplasm that both drives it and can overturn it—boredom," McGonigal and *Arkham Asylum* implicate reality, rather than games.[54]

Like the reality against which *Arkham Asylum* and McGonigal react, Arkham Asylum without the Joker is boring, apathetic, and complacent. The Joker's presence makes play possible, but it also enables Batman's heroism: without the Joker, there is no need for Batman, no game, and no play. *Arkham Asylum* encourages both ludic- and gameplay through the Joker because both are necessary components of engagement with reality—not just with games. Games are, in their most basic form, problems, and problems are plentiful in reality. *Arkham Asylum* presents play as a means of stimulating creativity and innovation in basic problem solving—the introduction of even simulated ludic play (as the Joker provides in *Arkham Asylum*) gives the problem solver (the player) the freedom to engage both creatively and critically with the problem, allowing for willing surrender to the limitations of the problem (the rules of the game) in order to embrace the freedom of critical, creative ludic

engagement. In McGonigal's words, gameplay "gives us explicit permission to do things differently," and, as Wark observes, "what displaces boredom is the capacity to act in a way that transforms a situation."[55] The veneer of ludic play removes the oppression of restrictive limitations, permitting the player to transform problem to game, apathetic work to critical play, and, in the process, to become—like Batman—a hero.

If the player were not motivated to engage with the Joker's game—to adopt his ethos and participate in his challenges—there would be no tension between order and chaos, no catharsis, no ludic, and the Joker would "win." *Arkham Asylum* sees the penetration of reality by gameplay as ideal: the possibility for creative and critical engagement with the problems (the games) that form reality. After all, play is only possible where rules exist for it to defy or circumvent, when there is a norm for the carnivalesque to invert. And, *Arkham Asylum* argues, all that is necessary to transform boring work into ludic play is a simple paradigm shift: the game's efforts, like the Joker's, force the player to "bring down your grim façade and let you see the world as I see it," a rich mélange of the serious and comic, ordered and chaotic, work and play.

Notes

1. Rocksteady Studios, *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, Xbox 360, PC (London: Eidos Interactive, 2009), n.p.

2. For the sake of brevity and because the player-character Batman is male, I will use male pronouns.

3. Chad Carlson, "The 'Playing' Field: Attitudes, Activities, and the Conflation of Play and Games," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 38, no. 1 (2011): 78.

4. Morton D. Davis, *Game Theory: A Nontechnical Introduction* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1983), xv.

5. Carlson, 83.

6. See Thomas Apperly, "What Games Studies Can Teach us About Videogames in the English and Literary Classroom," *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 33, no. 1 (2010): 12–23; James Newman, "The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame: Some Thoughts on Player-Character Relationships in Videogames," *Game Studies* 2 (2002): http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman; Scot Brendan Cassidy, "The Videogame as Narrative," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 28, no. 4 (2011): 292–306; Jesper Juul, "Games Telling Stories?—A Brief Note on Games and Narratives," *Game Studies* 1 (2001): http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/.

7. Cassidy, 292.

8. Ian Dickenson, "*Batman: Arkham Asylum*, Xbox 360, PS3 Review," *darkzero*, September 13, 2009, http://darkzero.co.uk/game-reviews/batman-arkham-asylum-xbox-360-ps3/.

9. Mike Snider, "'Feel Cool Like Batman' Playing This Game," *USA Today* (August 25, 2009), 05d.

The game finds its roots not simply in a long tradition of comics, animated series, and films, but, more specifically, in Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's graphic novel, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (New York: DC Comics, 1989). Elements of the game's Joker appear in Morrison and McKean's novel, as well: his remarks in a patient interview about inkblot tests,

his obsession with Batman's madness, and his invitation to Batman to Arkham Asylum. Most of the Joker's characterization and manipulation of media throughout *Arkham Asylum*, however, are not in Morrison and McKean's novel.

10. Snider, 05d.

11. Edwin Millheim, "Xbox 360 *Batman: Arkham Asylum* Review," *Impulse Gamer*, August 2009, http://www.impulsegamer.com/360batmanarkhamasylum.html.

12. Dickenson, n.p.

13. Chris Kohler, "Review: Creepy *Batman: Arkham Asylum* redefines Comic-Book Game," *Wired*, September 1, 2009, http://www.wired.com/gamelife/2009/09/batman-arkham-asylum-review/.

14. Ibid., n.p.

15. Anthony J. Kolenic, "Madness in the Making: Creating and Destroying Narratives from Virginia Tech to Gotham City," *Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 6 (2009): 1027.

16. Rocksteady, n.p.

17. Ibid., n.p.

18. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 280, 293 (originally published in 1967).

19. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11, 5 (originally published in 1965).

20. Ibid., 7.

21. Ibid., 235.

22. Rocksteady, n.p.

23. Ibid., n.p.

24. Ibid., n.p.

25. Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 22–23.

26. Rocksteady, n.p.

27. Ibid., n.p.

28. Ibid., n.p.

29. Ibid., n.p.

30. Ibid., n.p.

31. Ibid., n.p.

32. Ibid., n.p.

33. Davis, 62.

34. Sicart, 27.

35. Rocksteady, n.p.

36. This is a theme resonant throughout the Batman tradition—after all, one must be at least a little mentally unstable to assume the guise of a flying nocturnal mammal in order to fight crime.

37. These episodes in *Arkham Asylum* are not fully two-dimensional, but they are reminiscent of early side-scrollers (like Nintendo's *Super Mario Brothers*), perhaps an acknowledgement by the game of its origins, just as the episodes reflect on Batman's origins.

38. Rocksteady, n.p.

39. There is no "middle stick" on an Xbox 360 or PS3 controller, and generally no stick at all on a PC control system. This is a clue to the player that the screen is "fake," although fan reports indicate that quite a few people immediately powered down their systems upon seeing the "crash," not noticing the small bat icon telling them that it was still a part of the game.

40. This "breaking of the fourth wall" has been done to great effect in other games, most notably *Eternal Darkness*.

41. Silicon Knights, *Eternal Darkness*, Nintendo GameCube (St. Catharine's, Ontario: Nintendo, 2002).

42. Rocksteady, n.p.

43. Ibid., n.p.

44. Ibid., n.p.
45. Ibid., n.p.
46. Ibid., n.p.
47. Ibid., n.p.
48. Ibid., n.p.
49. Ibid., n.p.
50. From a player's perspective, this final battle is a disappointing slog through a sequence of button-mashing combats with TITAN-Joker and his henchmen. When the player realizes that he is engaged in the final combat, the game loses some of its luster, and the ending is deliberately anticlimactic. However, it is also necessary in a very practical sense: the game must end sometime, and, therefore, the Joker must lose.
51. There are two: *Batman: Arkham City*, released by Rocksteady in 2011, and *Batman: Arkham Origins*, a prequel released in 2013 by Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment. The Joker appears in both.
52. Jane McGonigal, *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 22.
53. Ibid., 29.
54. McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 153.
55. McGonigal, 206; Wark, 161.

"WHY SO SERIOUS?"

Warner Bros.' Use of the Joker in Marketing *The Dark Knight*

kimberly owczarski

The box-office and critical success of *Batman Begins* in 2005 signaled a new direction for the Batman film franchise after it had lain dormant for eight years. Despite heavy competition at the box office, *Batman Begins* emerged as the eighth highest-grossing film of the year, earning $206 million at domestic theaters and grossing an additional $167 million in foreign theaters.[1] The film reinvigorated ancillary streams for the character, particularly in terms of toy sales. *Batman Begins* ended with the introduction of a calling card for a new Gotham villain, the Joker, a plot point that clearly set up a sequel and Batman's next foe. When *Batman Begins* performed so well, Warner Bros. greenlit the sequel to the film, which was to follow in 2008, with director Christopher Nolan returning. Nolan was an unusual choice for such an important long-term project, as he had never directed a big-budget studio film before *Batman Begins*. Instead, his background was in independent film, and his films featured complex narratives, dark themes, and provocative subject matter, particularly in his best known film, *Memento*, released in 2000. Warner Bros.' gamble with the director paid off, however, and as the sequel moved into active development, fans and critics were eager to see what Nolan would next bring to the franchise.

Over the next two years, rumors swirled about characters to be included in the sequel, as well as the casting choices related to those characters. The Joker's presence was all but confirmed based on the ending of *Batman Begins*, though the studio held off on providing an official announcement. Many fans were excited to see who would take on such an iconic Batman villain since Jack Nicholson's performance of the character in the film *Batman*—directed by Tim Burton and released in 1989—was so memorable. After an interview with *IGN* in July 2006 in which his enthusiasm for playing the Joker was

clearly stated, Robin Williams was one of the prime candidates discussed in fan communities as their choice in the role.[2] On July 20, 2006, the entertainment news website *Latino Review* announced that the studio had offered the coveted role to Heath Ledger, which set off a flurry of fan discussion about Ledger's appropriateness for the Joker. For example, in a *Comic Book Resources* forum reacting to the casting news, fans wondered about the credibility of a "Brokeback Joker" who was too much of a "pretty boy" for the role, claimed Ledger was "100 percent wrong for this part," and likened the casting to a "sick joke."[3] At that point, his casting was considered a rumor as no executives publicly confirmed the news. Over a week later, on August 1, 2006, Warner Bros. officially announced Ledger as the Joker.[4] Right after this casting news was officially released, mainstream publications also began to debate the choice of Ledger in the role. An article on *Entertainment Weekly* asked, "Can I Get a 'Holy Casting Against Type, Batman?!'"[5]

In many ways, these discussions made sense. Ledger did not seem like the right fit for the villain of a studio tentpole picture. He had started as the male lead in teen-oriented pictures such as *1o Things I H ate A bout You* (Gil Junger, 1999) and *A Knight's Tale* (Brian Helgeland, 2001) before beginning to seek more mature roles. His small but important role as Sonny, the troubled offspring of prison guard Hank Grotowski (played by Billy Bob Thornton), in *Monster's Ball* (Marc Forster, 2001), was a transition from the youth characters he had previously portrayed to more adult roles. Director Ang Lee cast Ledger in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) as Ennis Del Mar, a cowboy whose love for another cowboy goes nearly unspoken due to personal and societal pressures. For his role as Ennis, Ledger earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Actor. Ledger went on to play a heroin addict in the acclaimed but little seen *Candy* (Niel Armfield, 2006). Nolan cast him because he thought Ledger was "'fearless,'" and could bring a new vitality to such an iconic and well-known character.[6]

Indeed, the Joker is the best known foe for Batman. Having been introduced in 1940, the Joker has been memorably portrayed across comic books, graphic novels, films, and television programs for decades. For those whose primary knowledge of the Joker was via film, Nicholson's flashy portrayal was well-regarded, while older generations might have preferred Cesar Romero's stint as the character on the late-1960s ABC television series. Mark Hamill has voiced the character across several animated series, films, and video games since the early 1990s. For the more hardcore fans of Batman, the graphic novels of the late 1980s and 1990s established a darker, more psychotic version of the Joker than these more mainstream incarnations. In *The Killing*

Joke, for example, the Joker attempts to drive Commissioner Gordon insane through torturous measures, including showing the commissioner photos of his wounded, nearly naked daughter, Barbara Gordon.[7] Once he was officially cast in the role, Ledger had a lot of versions of the popular Joker character to contend with for fans' and casual Batman viewers' appreciation.

The choice of the actor and the foregrounding of such an important character were thus seen as key elements in the sequel's potential success, and were the cornerstones of the film's promotional campaign. As *The Dark Knight* headed into production in 2007, Warner Bros. concurrently began the film's marketing campaign by sending Joker cards, like the one seen at the end of *Batman Begins*, to comic book stores across the country. As the film remained in production, Warner Bros. continued to market *The Dark Knight* mostly via a focus on the Joker, instituting a variety of real life and virtual events that engaged fans with the film's villain. However, in January 2008, Ledger suddenly passed away at the age of twenty-eight, his death the result of a toxic mix of prescription drugs. At that point, the studio had a major dilemma: how should the film be marketed given the substantial focus on Ledger and his character through the early part of the campaign? There was no easy answer, especially because fans had been actively engaging with the character since the end of the previous film.

This essay examines the use of Heath Ledger and the character of the Joker with regard to *The Dark Knight*'s marketing campaign. In the following pages, I detail how they were used to motivate the fan base early in the marketing process and the degree to which Ledger's death led to a shift later in the campaign. Ultimately, I argue that both Ledger and his performance as the Joker were central to the critical and box-office success of the film, a success achieved in large part due to Warner Bros.' intricate positioning of both star and character. Unlike so many marketing campaigns for recent studio tentpoles, *The Dark Knight* used an unconventional approach—starting very early and releasing material often during its phases of development, production, and postproduction—that solidified the importance of the Joker to fans. While it may have been titled *The Dark Knight*, in many ways it was the Joker's film as positioned first by the studio and later supported by fans and critics.

Marketing Hollywood Studio Tentpoles in the Age of the Internet

The idea of the web as an interactive way to advertise Hollywood studios films is a relatively new one, as high-speed access to the Internet for the majority of filmgoers is only about a decade old. But its importance has grown steadily over the past decade, from the creation first of websites for films to more advanced content on those sites, including casual games to social networking which allows fans to quickly and easily discuss products with other like-minded individuals. Still, the use of the Internet to promote Hollywood films has not always been sophisticated, as many early sites functioned as virtual press kits, often just advertisements "suggesting that the real thrills are to be found in the movies themselves."[8] The definition of movie promotion has shifted as a result of filmgoers' access to the Web, with studios often trying to engage potential consumers before, during, and even after the film's theatrical release. Indeed, the marketing tactics that *The Dark Knight* used throughout its lengthy campaign were the culmination of several successful lessons about contemporary film promotion that had developed over the last decade.

According to media scholar P. David Marshall in his essay, "The New Intertextual Commodity," one of the most salient aspects of the Internet for (potential) advertisers is the ability to integrate a promotion with specific entertainment content, particularly by interweaving the text and the marketing. In his view, "the line between forms of promotion and the cultural product is blended and hybridized in contemporary production."[9] Based on principles of marketing to children that emerged during the 1980s in which Saturday morning cartoons like *Transformers* functioned as half-hour advertisements for toy lines sold in stores, Marshall argues that contemporary promotional texts involve a sense of play across media platforms for adults as well. Contemporary media texts provide the viewer "a sense of engagement, agency and transformation," with the viewer being able to interact with a simulated environment, move about that environment with a degree of his or her own purpose, and become a character from a different background.[10] Thus, the new intertextual commodity depends upon a complex relationship between producers and consumers, but viewers are not given a completely free reign to interact with cultural products at will. Marshall suggests that a bounded freedom allows viewers to engage with texts within a set of rules, "rules [that can be] made and remade, transformed and shifted by the players" over time rather than remaining simply the province of mediamakers.[11]

The power of the new intertextual commodity as a playspace navigated by viewers desiring to interact more fully with narratives was first demonstrated by the runaway success of the independently produced feature film *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999) and the website originally created by its filmmakers to promote the text. The website failed to promote the film in the traditional sense, as it lacked easy links to trailers, posters, and assorted merchandize. Rather, the site expanded upon the story depicted in the film, providing a space for viewers to find out more information about the missing filmmakers and the myths they were filming, as well as explore artifacts related to the supernatural found in Burkittsville, Maryland. The site "authenticated" the story seen in the film, and posited that "the film *not* [be seen] *as film*, but as one more artifact, along with the materials gathered together at the Web site" for piecing together what happened in this cross-media narrative.[12] Media scholar J. P. Telotte argues that the importance of *The Blair Witch Project* website "points in various ways away from the film's privileged status as a product of the entertainment industry. Or more precisely, its 'project' is to blur such common discrimination, to suggest, in effect, that this particular film is as much a part of everyday life as the Internet."[13] Viewers spent more time interacting with the website than they spent seeing the film in the theater, directing their own paths and pace through the compiled information. Though supported with more traditional promotions, such as thirty-second spots on network television and posters located throughout movie theater lobbies, the website was often cited as integral to how viewers first approached the film. The film went on to gross $141 million at the domestic box office and $108 million at foreign theaters.[14] *The Blair Witch Project* also sold millions of merchandisable products and spawned a sequel, becoming one of the first films to credit its website as vital to its success.

Media scholar Henry Jenkins refers to the complex relationship that both producers and consumers have to a text such as *The Blair Witch Project* as convergence, and describes it as "both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process."[15] From the producer's standpoint, convergence provides ample opportunity to engage in synergy—the coordination of several business lines within the same corporate family to promote a particular product. On the other hand, convergence makes fans front and center "in a courtship dance between consumers and marketers" as they spend more time, money, and effort engaging with their favorite texts.[16] Contemporary stories that are shaped across various texts—i.e., transmedia—require consumers to

> assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience.[17]

In his view, convergence is an inherently social experience, requiring the input of many to see the grander arc of a complex story told across media. Thus, Jenkins stresses that "consumption has become a collective process."[18]

In recent years, perhaps no text has crossed the synergistic aspects of transmedia storytelling with the participatory aspects of convergence culture as much as ABC's hit television series, *Lost* (2004–2010). Encompassing a variety of storytelling mediums—including mobisodes, webisodes, video games, and tie-in novels, to name but a few—Disney and the producers of the program created a vast, expansive narrative world that required consumers to actively engage with content online in order to understand the overarching story. Indeed, media scholar Derek Johnsons argues that "in its participation in convergence culture, *Lost* is not a singular televisual narrative, but a manifold, multiplatform, divergent narrative often experienced outside television or any single medium."[19] For example, during the summer of 2006, between the program's second and third seasons, an alternate reality game (ARG) was launched entitled "The *Lost* Experience," engaging in "a range of consumption experiences through the careful coordination of content deployed successively through television and newspaper advertisements, public appearances, corporate websites, published novels, podcasts, guerilla video, and even candy distribution."[20] Many aspects of the game itself were sponsored by brands including Verizon, Jeep, and Sprite, further blurring the line between advertisement and content. The game reached millions of unique players all over the world, and engaged players in the world of *Lost* during its months-long summer hiatus.

Each of these cases provides a foundation for thinking about the impact of Warner Bros.' promotion of Ledger and the Joker for *The Dark Knight*. As Marshall defines the new intertextual commodity, the advertisement and content mix together and create a sense of play for the viewer. Telotte describes *The Blair Witch Project*'s success as being based on its ability to bring an expanded experience into the everyday life of viewers, primarily as directed via the Internet through exploration and play. Likewise, Jenkins argues that convergence meets the needs of both corporations looking to make money across a spectrum of products and viewers desiring to engage more closely with contemporary texts. Finally, the intricacy of *Lost*'s ARG provides a good

starting-off point for thinking about the scope of the Joker's own marketing campaign. Indeed, the marketing campaign of *The Dark Knight* integrated these elements together as part of a transmedia experience. 42 Entertainment—the marketing firm Warner Bros. hired to oversee the ARG—created a campaign deemed "one of the most interactive movie-marketing campaigns ever hatched by Hollywood: a multi-platform, hidden-in-plain-sight promotional blitz."[21]

"Wall-to-Wall Joker": *The Dark Knight*'s Marketing Campaign

With *The Dark Knight* in production for much of 2007, Warner Bros. instigated a viral marketing campaign during that summer to begin the film's promotion. A few days after the official Warner Bros. website for the film launched in May, Joker cards started appearing in specialty comic shops.[22] The official Warner Bros. website featured a campaign poster for character Harvey Dent—who was running for Gotham's district attorney, with the tagline "I Believe in Harvey Dent"—while the Joker cards featured an alternative website address, IBelieveinHarveyDentToo.com. The same poster appeared at this alternative site, but it was defaced. In investigating the page, users entered their email addresses when prompted and then received an email message which gave the location of one pixel that was to be removed from the website. As more users investigated the page, provided their email addresses, and received messages, pixels were slowly removed and a new image was revealed. Fans, using sites such as *Ain't It Cool News* and *Superhero Hype*, spread the word about the site, which soon displayed a hidden picture of the Joker, the first public image of the character featured in the forthcoming sequel. Given the number of discussions of Ledger as the Joker that had occurred in the year since the announcement of his participation, it is hardly surprising that the fan community responded so quickly and eagerly to this challenge. Whether disappointed or excited by the news of Ledger's casting, fans wanted to know what his version of the Joker would look like and what direction he was taking with the character.

This public display of Ledger as the Joker was only the first step in realizing an ARG that would evolve over the course of the next year and would eventually feature the efforts of over ten million unique players in seventy-five countries.[23] The next major events in this game were launched at the 2007 Comic-Con. Though there was no panel for the feature film, a number

of activities for *The Dark Knight* were evident at the annual convention. Individuals with Joker-style makeup on their faces handed out over 10,000 vandalized dollar bills to attendees, while defaced Uncle Sam posters around the convention center included a date, time, and location for potential recruits to congregate and learn more about becoming a henchman for the Joker. At the appointed time, hundreds of willing participants met at that location and saw five jets write a phone number in the sky. Players who called the number heard a conversation between two of the Joker's henchmen that revealed a code to be entered on the WhySoSerious.com website. Once the code was entered, players were given instructions for a scavenger hunt around San Diego. Before they could begin the hunt, they had to put makeup on their faces like the Joker with the provided materials. Their goal was to keep a step ahead of the Gotham City Police, who were eagerly searching for the Joker among them. Over 650,000 unique participants online helped the scavenger hunt participants by answering clues along the route.[24] At the end of the scavenger hunt, those that played the actual game in San Diego received free masks like those used in the film, while those playing online had first access to the film's teaser trailer.

By the end of the 2007 Comic-Con, the WhySoSerious.com website was supposedly taken down by the Gotham police department, as the city's law enforcement grew increasingly worried about the Joker's growing power. Indeed, the scavenger hunt's activities were capped by the removal of a man who claimed to be the Joker by a fake mob and several armed guards, and his (fake) body was later found dead in the streets as part of the game. Gotham authorities reported that the menace of the Joker was now gone. The website was dormant for months after Comic-Con. Of course, the Joker was not dead and he actively resumed trying to set up an army in November 2007, as the ARG re-emerged in full swing and grew more intricate. After WhySoSerious.com was reactivated in late October, the Joker asked willing conspirators to take pictures of themselves with certain letters of the alphabet and upload them to the site. Once acceptable entries were received for each letter, a ransom note was assembled from the fan-generated photos which read, "the only sensible way to live in this world is without rules." Soon after the reveal of the note, though, the image burned away and was replaced by a photo of the Joker and an audio clip directing fans to put on makeup in the style and color of the Joker's and photograph themselves in front of landmarks across the globe. These were to be uploaded to a new website, rorysdeathkiss.com, within a short time frame.[25] For those who successfully uploaded a photograph by

the deadline, they received a special package right before Thanksgiving that contained a printed copy of the *Gotham Times*, which provided the address for the paper's website.

Similar to what happened with Harvey Dent's campaign poster at the beginning of the campaign, the website featuring the *Gotham Times* quickly was defaced, with the Joker's prankishness on full display as he re-wrote headlines and drew on the photographs. He even changed the name of the newspaper to the *Ha Ha Ha Times*. Fans eagerly looked for clues in the *Ha Ha Ha Times* and found several other related websites to *The Dark Knight*, including one for the Gotham Police Department, a Gotham National Bank site, and a page memorializing Gina Tortericci, a young woman who was killed by a stray bullet when rival gang members got into a fight on the streets of Gotham. The ARG did not slow down during the holiday season, either. Days later, another note appeared on RorysDeathKiss.com, this time giving the location of twenty-two bakeries that would have a special present available for someone named "Robin Banks." Lucky individuals who got to the bakeries first received a cake with a package baked inside of it, a package that included a cell phone and charger. These individuals called a number provided in the package to set up communication with one of the Joker's henchmen, and then were to await further instructions. Those who received cakes at the bakeries were also among the first people to receive free tickets to IMAX screenings of *I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007) in select cities in early December. The IMAX screenings were the first venues to view a portion of the finished film, as the prologue featuring the introduction of the Joker was to be attached to these screenings of the Warner Bros.-produced *I Am Legend*.

As the first Hollywood feature film to shoot several sequences exclusively in the IMAX format, the film's six-minute prologue might have been a special attraction on its own measure. Claimed director Nolan, about why he chose to use the format for the film: "There's simply nothing like seeing a movie that way. . . . It's more immersive for the audience."[26] But the fact that it (re-) introduced the Joker character on the big screen—and, in this case, the really big screen—was an opportunity to market the film via the strength of Ledger's performance. For Nolan, the choice of the IMAX format to highlight Ledger's first few moments on-screen was to provide "the grandest entrance possible" for the Joker.[27] While Nolan may have described the IMAX format as immersive itself, it was also a comment that worked for fans' relationship to the Joker given how much fans had interacted with the character thus far in the marketing campaign. Many fans felt immersed in the Joker's world

by participating in the character's online and real world antics at the 2007 Comic-Con and through the ARG over the past several months.

Thus, for nearly eight months, *The Dark Knight*'s marketing campaign, particularly its viral campaign, primarily focused on the Joker. After all, the film's prologue in the IMAX format introduced the Joker, not Harvey Dent. Dent certainly was not as well-known as a Batman character as the Joker, and the casting of Aaron Eckhart did not receive the same amount of attention, so the campaign's focus on Ledger and on the Joker made sense. While Dent might have a featured article in the *Gotham Times* or a campaign poster prominent on Warner Bros.' official website, fans were actively engaging with the character of the Joker, and not with Dent. The balance of the campaign switched dramatically, however, with the sudden death of Ledger on January 22, 2008.

Outside of the studio, no one was quite sure what work Ledger had completed on the film before he passed away. Within days of Ledger's death, online gossip columnist Ted Casablanca ran a story quoting an unnamed source close to the film who stated that the audio was nowhere near complete for the Joker and that "someone will have to dub his voice. It's the only way."[28] Nolan and Warner Bros. declined to comment on the story, which was picked up by a number of websites and mainstream press outlets, such as *Entertainment Weekly*. Most of the marketing materials for *The Dark Knight* were removed from the official website and replaced by a picture of Ledger with the following statement underneath: "We mourn the loss of a remarkable talent gone too soon and the passing of an extraordinary man who will be greatly missed."[29] His unexpected death sent Warner Bros. executives and marketers into a tailspin. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* five days after his death ran with the headline "Ledger's Death Jolts Web Marketing of 'Dark Knight.'"[30] Nor was this the only article to focus on the change that would have to occur in the marketing campaign for the film. Weeks after his death, Warner Bros. conducted "pulse checks" to find out about the film's awareness and interest levels, only to find that Ledger's death had actually increased interest in the film by 20 percent.[31]

Still, the marketing campaign shifted gears. For months, the ARG lie dormant. The phones from the bakeries had been silent since December, but came back to life in March 2008, around the same time that the campaign started back up and focused on Harvey Dent. While activities continued around the Joker, the larger press-gathering events occurred with the Dent campaign. First, those who had signed up for activities at some point during the ARG

received a phone call from Dent asking for their support and then providing them with a website address to find further information about his campaign. Next, Dentmobiles visited thirty-three cities across the United States and staged rallies for Gotham's leading candidate for district attorney. Fans who came to the rallies in Minneapolis, Boston, Austin, and Los Angeles, among other cities, received posters, buttons, and T-shirts with the candidate's name and image set amid a red, white, and blue background. Local news stations and newspapers covered these rallies, particularly in Chicago where police officers actually broke up an early morning rally.[32] In early April, players in the ARG started receiving calls about taking a political survey, which was a thinly veiled attempt to slander Dent's image through push polling techniques. Around the same time, a short video of Assistant District Attorney Rachel Dawes (played by Maggie Gyllenhaal) holding a press conference in support of Dent appeared online. In June 2008, fans had the opportunity to vote in Gotham's election for district attorney, as long as they were registered with IBelieveinHarveyDent.com.

The Joker's campaign was present, but it had certainly been scaled back and did not command as much attention as Dent's campaign did. That said, fans continued to engage with the character. On April 1, nearly two dozen packages were stowed in lockers in bowling alleys across the world, each containing a message from the Joker and another cell phone. Once all of the packages were picked up, fans were then to work together to bring down the website of Acme Security System. As players worked on the clues, they received a phone message from Lieutenant Jim Gordon asking for their cooperation in bringing down a criminal ring led by the Joker. Weeks later, participants were invited to be part of a flash mob in twelve locations across the world. Participants met up at the specified location at the correct time, followed a trail of clues, and were led to movie theaters where they were treated to the new trailer for *The Dark Knight*. By this time in May 2008, the official marketing campaign from Warner Bros. geared up for its last push of the summer by releasing this last trailer. As one journalist described it, the trailer was "wall-to-wall Joker," foregrounding Ledger as the primary reason to see the film.[33] Indeed, the first words spoken in the trailer are by the Joker and nearly every line of dialogue that is featured in its two and a half minute duration is from the character.

With this marketing focus on the Joker and Ledger, both officially and through the viral campaign, it is hardly surprising that upon the film's release, the quality of Ledger's performance was a dominant theme in critical reviews of the film. Manohla Dargis of the *New York Times* deemed Ledger's

Joker "a creature of such ghastly life, and the performance is so visceral, creepy and insistently present that the characterization pulls you in almost at once."[34] Justin Chang of *Variety* stressed that it was "a tribute to Ledger's indelible work that he makes the viewer entirely forget the actor behind the cracked white makeup and blood-red rictus grin, so complete and frightening is his immersion in the role."[35] Again, the idea of immersion—this time used by the critic to describe the relationship between actor and role—pops up related to the Joker. Nor were these critics the only ones to give high marks to Ledger and the film. Viewers enjoyed the film even more than the nation's top critics did, giving the film an average CinemaScore of an A.[36] Indeed, Dan Fellman, Warner Bros.' distribution chief, claimed that by the Sunday of opening weekend, the film received a significant amount of repeat business while Fandango, the online ticket site, reported that 64 percent of the site's users who had already seen it planned to see it again.[37] In addition, a CinemaScore that high guaranteed some additional ticket sales through word-of-mouth; those not typically drawn to the megaplex for a blockbuster responded to their friends' rave reviews. As a result of its critical success, *The Dark Knight* went on to break a number of box-office records including the largest opening weekend of all-time with nearly $160 million at the domestic box office; the fastest movie to reach $200 million at the domestic box office (it took five days); and the fastest film to reach $300 million at the domestic box office (ten days).[38] The film went on to gross $533 million at domestic theaters and another $469 million at foreign theaters to not only become the top grossing film of the year, but also the second highest grossing film of all-time.[39]

Given the focus on Ledger's performance once the film was released in July, Warner Bros. made a big Oscar marketing push for him to be nominated as Best Supporting Actor at the end of 2008. "For Your Consideration" ads in trade magazines such as *Variety* focused on remarks from prominent critics about his performance as well as an image of the Joker with an anguished face. The studio's "For Your Consideration" ads for Best Picture also contained an image of the Joker, this time from the film's prologue. For Warner Bros., it was a hard campaign to manage. On the one hand, the studio did not want to sensationalize his death in order to garner sympathy votes and provoke a backlash as a result; on the other hand, as Ledger's last finished performance, the Oscar would serve as a lasting tribute to an actor whose death was so untimely.[40] Also, his performance was viewed as so integral to the success of that film that it became a way of promoting the entire enterprise. Warner Bros. rereleased the film in theaters the weekend after the Oscar nominations came out, an attempt to further the film's record-breaking box-office haul.

After Ledger received the posthumous nomination, David Carr of the *New York Times* stressed that Warner Bros. had treaded carefully "between elegy and ghoulishness, reminding the public and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences that one of the great performances in 2008 was the last of Mr. Ledger's career, but doing so without seeming to commodify his death."[41] In the introduction to the award at the ceremony, actor Kevin Kline stressed that "with this bravura performance . . . Heath Ledger has left us an original and endearing legacy."[42] Ledger ultimately won the trophy, one of only two Academy Awards received for the highest grossing film of the year.

Ledger and the Joker: An Enduring Legacy

In February 2012, satiric news outlet the *Onion* posted a story entitled "Moviegoers Not Interested in Hearing What Is, Isn't Possible, Demand Heath Ledger 'Dark Knight Rises' Appearance," a story meant to make fun of fans' continued discussion about the actor and character long after his death. The story contained a petition titled "We Want Heath Ledger in 'The Dark Knight Rises,'" and it claimed that "we are entitled to have our request for Mr. Ledger to reprise his Academy Award-winning performance as the Joker fulfilled."[43] Late in 2010, Warner Bros. and Nolan denied that Ledger shot a cameo for the third film in the trilogy, *The Dark Knight Rises* (Nolan, 2012), before his death, though rumors continued to persist about his involvement in the film up until its theatrical release.[44] In 2009, fans created an online petition on the website *The Ultimate Joker*, asking for Warner Bros. to permanently retire the character of the Joker from film.[45] As these examples attest, Ledger's contribution to the franchise is enduring, despite his untimely death.

Ledger's Academy Award win was a capstone to a film that performed well both critically and at the box office, a testament to his efforts as the Joker. Of course, Warner Bros. helped Ledger every step along that way by hiring marketing firm 42 Entertainment to spearhead a marketing campaign for *The Dark Knight* that solidified the Joker as the central part of the film's experience. As *The Dark Knight* ARG restarted months after Ledger's death, it was an attempt to harness fans' continuing desires to interact with the character. In asking fans to take part in the "Why So Serious?" marketing campaign for *The Dark Knight*, the studio highlighted the Joker's importance to a multimillion dollar franchise. From the preproduction to the postproduction process, Ledger and the Joker were central to discussions of the film, and they continued to focus on actor and character even after the film left the theater. Few

performances in contemporary tentpole pictures receive not only the accolades that Ledger received, but also impact the direction of a film so significantly. In fact, Ledger's role as the Joker continues to be a serious business for Warner Bros., prominently foregrounding the intermingling of text and advertisement prominent in contemporary Hollywood studio practices.

Notes

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9. P. D. Marshall, "The New Intertextual Commodity," in *The New Media Book*, edited by Dan Harries (London: BFI Publishing, 2002), 71.

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11. Ibid., 80.

12. Telotte, 35.

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16. Ibid., 73.

17. Ibid., 21.

18. Ibid., 4.

19. Derek Johnson, "The Fictional Institutions of *Lost*: Worldbuilding, Reality, and the Economic P ossibilities o f N arrative D ivergence," in *Reading Lost: P erspectives o n a Hi t T elevision Show*, edited by Roberta Pearson (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 36.

20. Ibid., 41.

21. Chris Lee, "Bat Infiltration," *Los Angeles Times*, last modified March 24, 2008, http://articles.latimes.com/2008/mar/24/entertainment/et-batmanviral24.

22. "Participate in a Local Election But Make It All about Me," *Whysoserious.com*, accessed April 1, 2012. http://whysoserious.com/. Unless otherwise noted, information about *The Dark Knight* ARG is from this website. When the marketing campaign was active, the site would change to reflect the new puzzles or information that participants needed as part of the game. Now that the campaign is over, the site has a fairly extensive summary of many of the ARG's activities that occurred over a fourteen-month period.

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IV

JOKER THEORY

RICTUS GRINS AND GLASGOW SMILES

The Joker as Satirical Discourse

Johan Nilsson

Introduction: The Clown Prince of Crime

The Joker is often understood as Batman's antithesis, as the yang to his yin, as the agent of chaos that threatens his need for order. Thus, while they function as opposites, they are also intrinsically tied to each other. Indeed, according to Marc DiPaolo, each Batman villain functions as a reflection on the Dark Knight and "they frequently parody or pervert his intentions and method of operation."[1] In the case of the Clown Prince of Crime, Batman's "true" nemesis, this function is especially relevant, but, as I argue in this essay, it can be taken even further. For DiPaolo, the Joker is a particular kind of commentary on Batman, one that essentially derives from the characters' antithetical logics (e.g., order vs. chaos).[2] However, as this essay will show, the Joker is not only a counter to Batman, but a satirical figure in which a subversive attitude towards contemporary society is realized.

In this role, the Joker-figure's origin and history is clearly referenced. Joker—fool, prankster, jester, trickster, clown; the derivations of the fool archetype are many, but joining them together is a sense of mischief and a ridicule of authority. In the many incarnations of the Joker, these characteristics vary considerably in both degree and force, making the character quite versatile. There is, for example, a significant difference in tone between Cesar Romero's comic Joker of the campy 1960s Batman television series[3] and film,[4] and Heath Ledger's portrayal of a sardonic psychopath in *The Dark Knight*.[5] Also, like the medieval fool, the Joker wears motley, bright-colored clothes and manifests the carnivalesque by ridiculing dominant ideology and authority, but unlike him, he is not a licensed fool. Fools, Mikhail Bakhtin tells us, were permanent and legitimate bearers of the carnivalesque, that principle

(and literary mode) which sees social hierarchies overturned, much like they were in the medieval carnival.[6] As such they share many characteristics with satire.

In a film context, satire has resurfaced as a significant mode of expression since the late 1980s, although it really came into its own during the 1990s thanks to a partial merging of independent cinema and Hollywood.[7] Going even further, Paul Simpson has argued that "satirical discourse suffuses the general humor resources of modern societies and cultures. It is not an alien form of humor, not something remote from everyday social interaction, but is as much part of the communicative competence of adult participants as puns, jokes and funny stories."[8] Satire has become a form that is part of the (everyday) media logic and that many of us appreciate. It should still be acknowledged, however, that it remains a somewhat ambiguous form in that its various incarnations differ in how easily they are identified as satire. This derives from the fact that satire is formally and thematically diverse.[9] Still, satire can be defined as a form that offers ways of resisting dominant ideology by ridiculing power and authority.[10] Further, its ridicule is usually constructed by devices such as irony and parody.[11] Also, according to Kathryn Hume, works described as satires have become more diverse, and satire often employs fantasy elements in interaction with irony, and it is sometimes identified by such fugitive qualities as tone or flavor.[12] The present essay takes this definition as a starting point in terms of analyzing the Joker as satire.

I look at three versions of the Joker; two of them filmic incarnations and one a comic book representation.[13] This essay does not make a point of the distinctions between comics and film. Instead, the focus is on the Joker as a character used to deliver satire, the rationale being that the satiric force invested in the Joker is not media-dependent. Even though the construction of satire may differ slightly depending on the medium's available devices, it always uses some version of irony and some kind of reference to social or cultural issues.[14] In Frank Miller's hugely influential Batman story *The Dark Knight Returns* (hereafter referred to as *TDKR*), the Joker is quite subdued (at least in the sequence analyzed below).[15] We get internal dialogue that gives us insight into his psyche but relatively few smiles. In contrast, the Joker of Tim Burton's gothic *Batman* from 1989, played by Jack Nicholson, leans towards the ridiculous, dancing and cavorting while constantly laughing. He is a clown and a prankster, using popular events (such as a parade), novelties, and household products to perform his deadly visual gags.[16] *The Dark Knight* (hereafter referred to as *TDK*), finally, features a truly chaotic Joker who is

more related to Miller's than to Burton's, and of the three he is the one who is the most indirect in terms of satire.

Arguing for a conception of the Joker as a satirical figure requires a firm base in the actual utilization of the character within the "text," as well as a constructive and pragmatic way of establishing links to discourses actualized by it. Simpson has developed a model for understanding and analyzing satire that is appropriate in this case.[17]

Satire

Satire, according to Simpson, is a discursive practice and it functions as "a higher-order discourse," meaning that it exists on a level above genre.[18] A similar view can be found in the common practice of regarding satire as a mode rather than a genre. This view is based on the fact that satire shows great formal and thematic variety, that it tends to borrow conventions to the extent that it could be regarded as pre-generic.[19] It also derives from particular institutions and the beliefs and knowledge which exist within these institutions in a particular culture, and from the perception that the satirist dislikes some aspect of society.[20] This means that the production culture that produces a satirical text is important in that we in that culture find norms, conventions, and specific modes of production.

Satire is made visible in a kind of interactive event where a viewer/reader recognizes the satirical intent by picking up on the text's references to phenomena beyond itself. For Simpson, this entails an echoing of another discourse event and thus invoking a particular context for the viewer/reader. The actual element within the text that has this function is called a *prime*.[21] In other words, the prime provides the viewer/reader with information about which discourse the satire positions itself within. A second text element, the *dialectic*, exists in opposition to the prime, and unlike the latter (which is inter-discursive) it is text-internal. The dialectic is to be understood as an antithesis (in a Popperian sense), thus signifying opposition or contrast. It is mainly in this contrasting dialectic that we find the irony that is so crucial to satire. We can thus speak about it as taking on the form of an ironic shift, meaning that the discourse that has been brought to the viewer's/reader's attention through the prime is suddenly viewed from a skewed position.[22] Let us turn to an example. In discussing the frequent use of news bulletins in Miller's and Lynn Varley's sequel to *TDKR*, *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (hereafter referred to as *TDKSA*),[23] Graham J. Murphy has noted that "caricaturized

(and superficial) media figures frenetically switch from one story to the next with neither critical insight nor debate."[24] We can thus say that the news bulletins that inform the story actualize a news/media discourse. The added fact that several of these newscasters are naked women skews our perception, which allows us to interpret the satirical intent with the representation: to criticize the sensationalistic and capitalist logic of contemporary news, but also, as Murphy argues, the sexualization of popular media.[25] Satire, in short, emerges through a process where a discursive realignment (by way of irony) is occurring.

The Joker, I argue, is a fundamentally ironic figure. He is contradictory, much like the figure of the wise fool—in which "wisdom and folly confront each other," thus allowing for sustained irony.[26] This means that irony takes on particular significance because the Joker is a very tragic (although sympathetic identification differs between various representations) and violent figure at a psychological level, but he wears the face of comedy. It is in this dialectic between these two traits, the psychological and the superficial, that we find the Joker's potential as a vehicle for satire.

The Dark Knight Returns

Murphy holds that "the political and social critique of the *Dark Knight* arc (*TDKR* and *TDKSA*) is diverse," and its targets include the emptiness of American mythology, the retracting of civil liberties, and the "misogynistic sexualization of popular media."[27] However, despite its diverse critique, I focus solely on that which is expressed by and through the Joker, who in this story is declared a victim of Batman's psychosis, which supposedly stems from sexual repression. Declared sane and released from Arkham Asylum, he appears on a thinly disguised simulacrum of NBC's *Late Night with David Letterman*,[28] where he ends up killing the host, his own therapist, another guest (whose mantra is appropriately Freudian: "Zex und zex und zex"), and the entire audience.[29]

The sequence echoes psychoanalytic discourse, but repositions it by presenting it in a popular setting. This is done on two "levels": the representation of popular late-night programming and the fact that the representation occurs in a popular medium (comic book). We can thus argue that the prime in this instance is centered on the popularization of psychoanalysis. In order for satire to be possible, however, the second main structural element needs to be established. The dialectic component becomes apparent when taking

into account the way the sequence is positioned within the book. There are two parallel actions occurring over nine pages, the one already mentioned and another one featuring Batman trying to fight through a force of policemen, led by Police Commissioner Yindel, who is convinced the Dark Knight is a public menace, on the roof of the building where the TV show is being taped. The irony is that the ostensibly reformed Joker is accepted into the popular limelight of television, where he kills 206 people, while the publically shunned Batman, in an attempt to reach the former, "only" puts twelve of the cops "protecting" the Joker from him in the hospital. The oppositional relationship between these two actions plays off the already established oppositional relationship between Batman and the Joker. Also, what we see here is an example of historical irony, which we can define as dealing with the historical mistake, or when an individual's or group's decision or action turns out to have unintended oppositional effects.[30] In the case of *TDKR*, the Joker has been embraced by both the media and the public, so when he turns on them the irony is cutting.

The Joker is construed as a victim of Batman by a representative and practitioner of psychoanalysis, who seems more interested in appearing on TV than of actually helping his patients. The twist, then, is that the satirical target is not psychoanalysis, but the popularization of it in the contemporary media culture. One could perhaps argue that it is the actual popularization that is targeted, that it brings with it a debasement of knowledge and a tendency to only see the superficial aspects of psychoanalysis (sex and sex and sex), thereby making popularization a threat to its established status as a science.[31] However, it seems more likely that the critique is directed at popular media culture in general (the fact that shots of television screens featuring a variety of media personalities are interspersed throughout the narrative supports this argument). The 1980s did, after all, introduce the increasingly commercialized age of cable and satellite television. In fact, televised media is referenced satirically throughout the *TDKR* narrative (just as it is in *TDKSA*), often in the form of panels showing news anchors and various media pundits. Of course, media critique is not reserved for this particular story alone, even though we can see how it, for instance, influenced Todd McFarlane in his early *Spawn* comics, where a similar way of presenting media critique is apparent.[32] A later example of media critique in comic book form is Peter Milligan and Mike Allred's satirical take on the superhero genre, *X-Force*, where the conventional superhero team was replaced by one where the members were media superstars controlled by commercial interests.[33] As I will show, the use of media discourse is continued in *Batman*.

Batman

The Joker's signature way of killing people is by releasing a deadly gas that leaves corpses with skin a deathly shade of pale and their mouths frozen in eerie rictus grins. In *Batman*, this gas contains a substance called Smylex and it is used in the construction of satire. In one sequence the Joker hijacks the television signal during a live news segment where one of the anchors has just dropped dead from exposure to Smylex.

Upbeat music plays as an image of the Joker pushing a shopping cart full of products fades in. He is in a grocery store and his first line is: "New and improved Joker products!" He then refers to a secret ingredient and shows the result of a blind test. One man, tied and gagged, is alive and clearly unhappy with the situation (he has been using brand X) while another is shown dead with a rictus grin on his face: ". . . with the new Joker brand I get a grin, again and again." Finally, he describes the "benefits" of using the products: ". . . that luscious tan, those ruby lips, and hair color so natural only your undertaker knows for sure." He, of course, refers (ironically) to how he himself looks (white skin, red lips, green hair), even though we are also shown several women showcasing the look.

The discourse echoed here is the television commercial, specifically those which market beauty products. Once again, then, the context is American commercial television, although this time it is actualized within a fictional film. This is then flipped on its head as the Joker appropriates the discourses of commercialism and beauty ideals in order to warn people that he has in fact poisoned their beauty products, which they probably bought after seeing some commercial or other. This ironic shift is then further established by featuring television news anchors reading the news (a recurring narrative device in the film, as it is in *TDKR*) without makeup. Apparent skin imperfections and a general look of drabness are far removed from the conventional made-up face as seen on TV. From this, we can infer that the satirical target is commercial culture, represented in this case by the TV commercial. As we shall see, however, there are reasons for discussing the target further.

Another example of the Joker-as-satire in the film occurs in a sequence set in Gotham's art museum. The setup is that the Joker, through subterfuge, has gotten news photographer Vicki Vale (Kim Basinger) to meet him at the museum (she thinks she is supposed to meet Bruce Wayne), and as she sits there waiting for him to arrive she receives a wrapped gift, which turns out to be a gas mask, just before a deadly gas is released through the ventilation system, killing everyone in the museum but her. Enter the Joker and his

figure 12.1 Jack nicholson's Joker co-opts the television screen in *Batman* (tim burton, 1989).

crew. He is dressed as a parody of an artist, wearing a shiny purple version of the classic French nineteenth-century artist's beret. Already we begin to infer what is to be the prime in this particular sequence: canonized art. Joker and crew begin to desecrate the museum's collection of classical paintings and sculptures, generally by painting them in bright colors, accompanied by the contemporary music of Prince. It is not until dialogue between the Joker and Vale commences, however, that the dialectic element emerges. The Joker:

> You're beautiful . . . in an old-fashioned kind of way, but I'm sure we can make you more today. . . . You know how concerned people are about appearances? This is attractive. That is not. Well, that is all behind me. I now do what other people only dream. I make art until someone dies. . . . I am the world's first fully functioning homicidal artist.

Here is an ironic shift where the dialectic causes us to infer beauty ideals as the satirical target. There is the first comment about classical beauty (which reinforces the act of desecration of classical art), which establishes the dialectic between classical and contemporary (the music shares this function). Of course, the Joker quickly asserts that today's ideals are no better and the only art worthy of the name is his homicidal kind where the human body becomes the canvas.

We can see here that the Joker of *Batman* functions as satire of the aesthetic (beauty) ideals of contemporary culture. Of course, this is also fitting

in relation to the Joker narrative itself, where he is created after having fallen into a vat of acid and been disfigured. So, the Joker's actions are motivated by his disfigurement, and the filmmakers have thus managed to create a cohesive story structure where the satire is supported on every level.

While the first example I brought up in this section does not make up quite as clear a representation of the critique against contemporary ideals as the second one, the fact that this discourse is apparent in both sequences makes for a case where it can be seen as the primary target. They are related to each other through their ties to popular culture. Summing up, we see that *Batman* and *TDKR* share several themes regarding contemporary culture, which is seen as heavily commercialized (the negative effects being sensationalism in the news and twisted beauty ideals).

The Dark Knight

"You . . . you complete me," the Joker says to Batman in *TDK*, thus confirming the intimate yet conflicting relationship that has been established between these two characters over the years (for instance, in *TDKR* the Joker calls Batman "darling," but also tries to kill him).[34] In *TDK*, this relationship revolves around moral issues. According to one reviewer of the film, the Joker is "a Mephistopheles whose actions are fiendishly designed to pose moral dilemmas for his enemies."[35]

In fact, Griffin has identified a bipolar moral pattern in many satires, stating that "in moral discourse some kinds of opposed pairs are almost inevitable."[36] This is, of course, reminiscent of the oppositional relationship between the prime and the dialectic elements construed by the model used in this essay. In the film, this pattern is centered on Batman as a force for order and the Joker as a force for chaos. The latter is a sentiment reflected in Alfred's (Michael Caine) warning to Bruce Wayne/Batman (Christian Bale): "Some people just want to watch the world burn." However, one should not assume that it is in this antithetical relationship that one finds "the sum of the satire's moral wisdom."[37] First of all, *TDK* is not *a* satire (neither are *TDKR* or *Batman*, primarily). Rather, in his role as a villain going up against the established order (interestingly, Batman does this as well albeit with different motives), the Joker is a vehicle for satire questioning and problematizing matters of morality.

Classical satiric theory views the satirist as operating in a world of clearly defined standards and moral certainty, and also assumes that such certainty

is shared by the reader.[38] This view, however, needs modification since it has been shown that satire often involves self-conscious reflection and play and because any moral idea expressed in satire is accompanied by its opposite, or at least a different one (usually through irony).[39] According to Griffin,

> what we behold in satire is not a neatly articulated homiletic discourse but the drama of an inflamed sensibility, or a cool and detached mind playfully exploring a moral topic. The reader's interest is not in rediscovering that greed is a bad thing or that deceit is to be avoided but in working through (with the satirist's help) the implications of a given moral position . . ., the contradictions between one virtue . . . and another . . . , or the odd similarities between a vice . . . and a virtue . . .[40]

The idea of contradictions and similarities between moral positions is indeed thematized through the Joker in *TDK*. In an attempt to show others that they are no better than he is, his actions force Batman (and others) to make difficult moral choices. The Joker's brand of terrorism is thus only seemingly without purpose. While it is true that there is no true political agenda guiding his actions, there is indeed a moral one. I am aware that politics and morality are deeply entrenched within one another, but for the sake of argument (the film puts more weight on moral issues than on explicitly political ones) they are kept apart here. For example, the issue of surveillance of citizens is brought up as Batman uses people's mobile phones without their knowledge to triangulate the Joker's position. While this action alludes to the Bush administration's creation of the Patriot Act in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, the film has Bruce Wayne and Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman) talk about it in terms of morality rather than for instance discussing its political ramifications.

In terms of the actual construction of the satirical discourse, *TDK* establishes terrorism as its prime. As already argued, the Joker's terrorist is nonpolitical, thus causing a discursive realignment; terrorism is placed within a discourse of morality. As a side note, we can draw a contrasting parallel to *TDK's* prequel, *Batman Begins*, where the villain Ra's al Ghul (Liam Neeson) has a clear political reason for his terrorist attack on Gotham City.[41] In *TDK*, the most poignant examples include the Joker's insistence that Batman must remove his mask or people will die, and then later, in the final confrontation, when he has rigged two ferries to explode; one is full of civilians, the other contains criminals, and both are given the detonator to the explosives on the other boat. The choice is sadistic: blow up the other ferry or both will explode. The civilians are, in the words of Shaun Treat, "frozen by indecision, the law

abiding herd paralyzed by ad hoc democratic indecision while a convict-in-chains shockingly rejects Joker's forced choice by throwing the trigger overboard and retreats to prayer." He asks: "Do these fantasy scenarios portray a noble public worth saving, or does it instead reveal the dependent passivity of a spectator democracy?"[42] The ironic twist occurs when one of the inmates, not one of the "stand-up citizens" on the other ferry, makes the noble choice, and throws the detonator away. While there is little actual humor in the scene, irony does run deep as the action goes against both narrative expectations and social norms.

We can thus talk about a satire that in this instance is directed at ourselves. The "normal" citizens, who look like a cross-section of the general public, want to blow up the other boat but are finally unable to because they lack the courage. In contrast, the inmate who finally makes a decision never hesitates. By forcing a choice, the Joker directs his critique against the public. He is convinced that one of the groups will detonate the other boat, but that never happens, and even his fail-safe is finally circumvented by Batman.

On the surface, the Joker succeeds in none of his endeavors, but it turns out that he has "an ace in the hole" (he is, after all, an embodiment of the trickster) in the person of District Attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), Gotham's white knight, who through the Joker's actions falls and turns into Two-Face, another Batman villain who embodies ironic contrast. Except for Batman's choice to take the blame for Two-Face's actions the film would have ended in complete cynicism, if not despair.

In the examples mentioned above, there are few specifically situated dialectic elements, which is a factor that could make the issue of the Joker as satire debatable in this case. The satire of *TDK* differs from both *TDKR* and *Batman* in that it depends much more on the Joker as a derivate of the fool archetype, which here is taken to the darker end of the spectrum. Ledger's version of the Joker is a truly violent sociopath, something that is reflected in the filmmakers' choice to forgo the rictus grin of Nicholson's Joker and instead go with the more violent iconography of the Glasgow smile (characterized by cuts starting in the corners of the mouth and going through the cheeks towards the ears, thus lengthening one's "smile"). Because of the somber, almost hopeless tone of the film, it can be characterized as employing satire of the sardonic persuasion, which Arthur Pollard sees as moving beyond even the cynic's hollow laughter: "The speaker may laugh, but his will be a lonely and embittered delight."[43]

The Joker functions as the motivator for the dialectic element of the satire in *TDK*. There is little, if any, humor in his actions, but because he wears the

face of comedy while performing heinous terrorist acts that are designed to pose moral dilemmas for other characters, the premise of satire is constructed. We infer it from the ironic shift that turns social norms on its head. The Joker instigates a violent and chaotic carnival where he plays with people's fears and moral norms, all in the name of his chaotic brand of fun.

Conclusions

By employing Simpson's model for analyzing satire as a discursive event based on irony, this essay has shown that the Joker indeed functions as satire, albeit in different ways and to different degrees. Whereas he functions most clearly as satire in *TDKR* and *Batman*, *TDK* shows that there exists, inherent in the character, the dialectic element that satire is so dependent on. Still, even in the latter case he causes narrative events that take place away from him in the story world and that are constructed to deliver satire. The case with the two boats set to explode is one example. So, whereas the Joker is not explicitly a part of the action, he is still used by the filmmakers as the device that causes it.

The satire manifested through the Joker has shown to be tied to its contemporary context. This does not come as a surprise seeing as this is one point on which satire researchers have reached a consensus. Neither, however, does this preclude making connections to more universal aspects of the actualized discourses. For instance, morality may be specifically tied to the contemporary discourse on terrorism in *TDK*, but there are, for instance, connections to more general issues of moral choice to be made as well. In light of this, it is also possible to argue that the Joker in a sense laughs at the world, and according to Bakhtin, the carnival's laughter is universal; it is directed at everyone and everything, and the world is perceived and understood in its comic aspect. It is also ambivalent, in the sense that it is happy and cheerful while simultaneously ironic and derisive.[44] We can thus consider the Joker, especially when he is used to turn the satire on the general public, as an unlicensed manifestation of the carnival spirit.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Joker as satire is that because he is the villain of the narrative, the satire is not constructed through sympathy or identification with the story's plot progression (i.e., the character-driven conflict). Even in the case of *Batman*, where Nicholson's Joker almost could be seen as the main character because of his screen time and dominance in terms of performance, we still tend to root for the Dark Knight. Interestingly,

DiPaolo has argued that the Joker is in fact romanticized in this particular film.[45] My point is that it is because the Joker *is* the villain that he is effective as a vehicle for satire. An important requisite for satire is that it creates a distance (usually through irony) between viewer/reader and text. If the Joker was to inspire sympathy, any satire set up by him would deteriorate, leading to an inability to maintain critical arguments.[46] This is not the case in any of the three stories looked at here.

The three Jokers of this essay are quite different characters, in both appearance and tone. These differences can generally be traced to aesthetic norms of the time and of the medium itself. Where they intersect, however, is in their satirical function. Part of it is the ironic nature of the Joker character, of course, but the analyses have shown that the Jokers are used on the narrative level to instigate actions that lead to the creation of satire. He is, in that sense, actually a very important catalyst when it comes to the progression of the story, and it is because of that that he can effectively carry the stories' satirical aims.

Notes

1. Marc DiPaolo, "Terrorist, Technocrat, and Feudal Lord: Batman in Comic Book and Film Adaptations," in *Heroes of Film, Comics and American Culture: Essays on Real and Fictional Defenders of Home*, edited by Lisa DeTora (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2009), 205.
2. Ibid., 205–206.
3. *Batman*, created by William Dozier (1966–68; Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox Television), Television.
4. *Batman: The Movie*, directed by Leslie Martinson (1966; Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2001), DVD.
5. *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2008; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2008), DVD.
6. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 12, 17–18.
7. Johan Nilsson, *American Film Satire in the 1990s: Hollywood Subversion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), n.p. A similar development has been acknowledged in a television context. Jonathan Grey, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, "The State of Satire, the Satire of State," in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, edited by Jonathan Grey, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), n.p.
8. Paul Simpson, *On the Discourse of Satire: Towards a Stylistic Model of Satirical Humour* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003), 4.
9. Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 3.
10. Gray et al., "The State of Satire," 10.
11. Nilsson, *American Film Satire*, 8–9.
12. Kathryn Hume, "Diffused Satire in Contemporary American Fiction," *Modern Philology* 105, no. 2 (2007): 300–302.

13. I am, of course, aware that these are two kinds of media that differ in several ways. They are both vehicles for visual storytelling, but they differ in terms of the arrangement of images, and how they represent time and space. Also, a comic book is a literary medium as well, with all that entails in terms of character exposition. Obviously, this is a potentially long discussion that I will not go further into here.

14. Nilsson, *American Film Satire*, 8–15.

15. Frank Miller and Lynn Varley, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 1986. The book that is referenced in this chapter collects the series originally published under the titles *The Dark Knight Returns*, March 1986 (New York: DC Comics), *The Dark Knight Triumphant*, April 1986 (New York: DC Comics), *Hunt the Dark Knight*, May 1986 (New York: DC Comics), and *The Dark Knight Falls*, June 1986 (New York: DC Comics).

16. *Batman*, directed by Tim Burton (1989; Burbank CA: Warner Home Video, 1998), DVD.

17. Simpson, *On the Discourse of Satire*, n.p.

18. Ibid., 8.

19. Nilsson, *American Film Satire*, 8; Hayden White, *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 7–9; M. D. Fletcher, *Contemporary Political Satire: Narrative Strategies in the Post-Modern Context* (Lanham and London: University Press of America, 1987), ix; Charles A. Knight, *The Literature of Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14; Arthur Pollard, *Satire* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd, 1970), 7; Stephen Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930–1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 20–23.

20. Simpson, *On the Discourse of Satire*, 8.

21. Ibid., 88–89. Simpson has borrowed the concept of prime from Catherine Emmott's theory of narrative comprehension, where it is used to describe how a text causes a particular context to come into focus for the reader. Catherine Emmot, *Narrative Comprehension: A Discourse Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 123–24.

22. Simpson, *On the Discourse of Satire*, 89–90. In other contexts this new point of view has been understood in similar ways but under different names—such as the Russian formalist notion of *ostranenie* and the neoformalists' term "*defamiliarization*," which was inspired by the former. Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 10–11. See also Gray, et al., "The State of Satire," 9.

23. Frank Miller and Lynn Varley, *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (New York: DC Comics, 2002). The edition used here collects the three issues originally published in single magazine form as *The Dark Knight Strikes Again 1*, December 2001 (New York: DC Comics), *2*, January 2002 (New York: DC Comics), and *3*, July 2002 (New York: DC Comics).

24. Graham J. Murphy, "Gotham (K)Nights: Utopianism, American Mythology, and Frank Miller's Bat(-topia)," in *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 4, no. 2 (2008), 19, http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v4_2/murphy/.

25. Murphy, "Gotham (K)Nights," 20.

26. Ralph Lerner, *Playing the Fool: Subversive Laughter in Troubled Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 2.

27. Murphy, "Gotham (K)Nights," 20.

28. *Late Night with David Letterman*, created by David Letterman (1982–93; New York: NBC), Television.

29. Miller, *TDKR*, 125–29.

30. Nilsson, "American Film Satire," 100.

31. Serge Moscovici, *Psychoanalysis: Its Image and Its Public* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2008), n.p.

32. Todd McFarlane, *Spawn* (Origins Collection, vol. 1) (Berkeley: Image Comics, 2011). The *Spawn* book that is referenced here collects issues 1 (Berkeley: Image Comics, June 1992), 2

(Berkeley: Image Comics, July 1992), 3 (Berkeley: Image Comics, August 1992), 4 (Berkeley: Image Comics, September 1992), 5 (Berkeley: Image Comics, October 1992), and 6 (Berkeley: Image Comics, November 1992), which were originally published in single magazine form.

33. Peter Milligan and Mike Allred, *X-Force: New Beginnings* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2001). The book collects issues originally published in magazine form as *X-Force* vol. 1, #116 (2001, May), vol. 1, #117 (2001, June), vol. 1, #118 (2001, July), vol. 1, #119 (2001, October), and vol. 1, #120 (2001, November).

34. Miller, *TDKR*, 41, 141.

35. Roger Ebert, "The Dark Knight," July 16, 2008, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-dark-knight-2008.

36. Griffin, *Satire*, 37.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., 35. Classical satire theoreticians include Northrop Frye, Ronald Paulson, and Robert C. Elliott.

39. Nilsson, *American Film Satire*, 12.

40. Griffin, *Satire*, 37–38.

41. *Batman Begins*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2005; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2005), DVD.

42. Shaun Treat, "How America Learned to Stop Worrying and Cynically ENJOY! The Post-9/11 Superhero Zeitgeist," in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2009), 107.

43. Pollard, *Satire*, 69.

44. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 11–12.

45. DiPaolo, "Terrorist, Technocrat, and Feudal Lord," 210.

46. See Nilsson, *American Film Satire*, 69.

THE JOKER, CLOWN PRINCE OF NOBILITY

The "Master" Criminal, Nietzsche, and the Rise of the Superman

ryan litsey

In the distance imagine hearing a familiar and evil laugh. Who could this be . . . perhaps the Clown Prince of Crime? Even without the mention of his name a clear picture is formed of this person: a sheepishly evil grin and the vibrant color of his clothes evoke his frightening motives. What is it about the Joker that seems to resonate in the world of popular culture? What are the characteristics he displays that routinely land him on not only the list of most notorious and best supervillians, but also on the list of most well-known characters in comic book history? The recognition of the Joker as a powerful character cannot merely come from an awesome superpower because, for all intents and purposes, he does not possess one. Instead, it is his special characteristics and the specific dichotomy between Batman and the Joker that resonates so much with each and every one of us. The root of this dichotomy exists in pieces of our personalities—the dark recesses of our minds and hearts. In order to understand why these characteristics resonate so strongly with each of us it is important to understand what makes the relationship between the Batman and the Joker tick. What is it that drives their behavior?

The best explanation of this relationship is given to us by the German philosopher Frederic Nietzsche. Nietzsche's discussion of the characteristics of the Superman, the revolt of the slave morality over the master morality, and the emergence of the man of *ressentiment* offer great insight into why the Joker is able to elicit such strong feelings in us, the viewers/readers. It is important, however, that once we understand this relationship we see how it manifests in current pop culture, in this case the video game *Batman: Arkham City* (*BAC*). I realize that this is a limited scope but the narrative can be quite revealing when examining the Joker. Not only does the narrative of the story

serve to present us with a moving comic, but it also connects the player to the Joker in a way that is quite different from reading a graphic novel. The analysis here is limited to the cut-scenes that occur within the game itself. The reason for this limitation is that given the infinite combinations of player input, player actions cannot be directly determined as a method for analysis of the content. However, all players must experience the cut-scenes, which serve to drive the story and can serve as a basis for examination.

The Joker as Nietzschean Superman

Understanding the Joker is to understand Frederic Nietzsche's concept of the Superman. The Superman for Nietzsche emerges in one his earliest books, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The book itself is set up as a fictional story about Zarathustra, who has come down from the mountains in order to share his wisdom of the Superman with the rest of the world. For Nietzsche, the Superman is driven by his will to power towards the goal of self-overcoming and constant action that is transformative. Nietzsche writes, I teach you the Superman. Man is something to be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?[1] The introduction illuminates this premise further:

> But to master oneself is the hardest of all tasks, that which requires the greatest amount of power: he who can do it has experienced the greatest increase in power, and if happiness is the feeling that power increases, that a resistance is overcome, then the Superman will be the happiest man and, as such, the meaning and justification of existence.[2]

We can see from the above passages the construction of a radical type of person: one who is constantly at war both with himself as well as with others. The chief characteristics of the Superman are self-overcoming, *amor fati* ("love of fate") and eternal recurrence.

The idea of self-overcoming is that of a constant struggle within the individual to confront the constructions of life itself. The ability to confront and begin the process of self-overcoming lies in the will to power. As Nietzsche writes,

> where I found a living creature, there I found will to power; and even in the will of the servant I found the will to be master. . . . And life itself told me this secret; "Behold," it said, "I am that which must overcome itself again and again."[3]

The will to power lies at the heart of self-overcoming. It is the chief process by which the Superman can engage and come to grips with life itself. It is a process of critical self-reflection as well as observation.

How might we imagine this characteristic in the Joker himself? Consider for a moment a scenario in which the Joker is an alien that has come to Earth. As an alien he may behave in a way that would seem foreign or different to us. He may engage in behaviors that we would consider evil or wrong. However, the alien does not measure its actions against our moral system or code. Rather, it measures its actions within itself. This is the nature of the Superman. The Superman may engage in what we would call homicidal rage, he may act in a psychotic manner; we may even call him a crazy person. However, for the Superman these terms are meaningless because he does not define himself by our morality; he is defined by his actions and guided by his will to power.

This will to power is evident is all things the Joker does. Rarely do we see the Joker obsessed with the common criminal fascinations concerning money and fame. Often his motivations are described as whimsical; rarely do we see a set outcome from his deeds. He merely seeks chaos of the current order. In *BAC* for Xbox 360, we see this characteristic as well. The Joker is a character unconcerned with the destruction around him and singularly guided to seek out the Batman regardless of all the other nefarious criminality happening in Arkham City. There is a driving force behind what the Joker does. No matter how many times he has been stopped by Batman, we always have a feeling that he will be back. He cannot truly be stopped because it is his will to power that drives him. Although it may be a simplistic idea, it begins to point to the profound drive the Joker has. Imagine for a moment that one is trying to help the suffering by feeding the homeless or providing clothes and shelter to those in need. We who live in society would call these good deeds. Nietzsche and the Joker would disagree with this assessment. The Superman would not try to ease pain. The Superman of the Joker would want to experience it. Once pain has been experienced, the Superman can overcome pain guided by his will to power as self-overcoming. Once pain has been overcome the Superman is no longer held back by the fear or trepidation of pain. He now becomes a force of will that can both feel pain and cause pain as part of his will to power. It is this process that allows us to understand the uniqueness of the Joker and why the Nietzschean argument of the will to power and self-overcoming is so profound in understanding what motivates the Joker. As Nietzsche writes,

> In all commanding there appeared to me to be an experiment and a risk: and the living creature always risks himself when he commands. Yes, even when he commands himself: then also must he make amends for his commanding. He must become judge and avenger and victim of his own law.[4]

We see with this passage further discussions of how the will to power can drive the Superman towards self-overcoming. Rather than seeing self-overcoming as a push towards a higher goal that is "good," self-overcoming can be viewed as a quest into oneself. For Nietzsche, the ideals of good and bad are constructs that have no objective meaning. It is only through overcoming the self that the Superman can truly find an understanding of life. This overcoming is not accomplished by being good; rather it is accomplished by plumbing the dark recesses of the soul. We see this quest play out in the Joker who exhibits a wild whimsical nature and laughs as he engages in some of the most "evil" things we can think of. He pushes forward without concern for the lives of those he hurts (or his own life, for that matter). He continues driving no matter how many times he is caught; he always has the smile on his face. This is the will to power playing out as self-overcoming. It is here in this concept we can also see why the Joker is a comedian filled with laughter. It is Nietzsche himself that connects these concepts with the idea of laughter. Nietzsche writes,

> But to me, on the contrary, there seems to be nothing *more* worth taking seriously, among the rewards for it being that some day one will perhaps be allowed to take them cheerfully. For cheerfulness—or in my own language gay science—is a reward: the reward of a long, brave, industrious, and subterranean seriousness, of which, to be sure not everyone is capable. But on that day we can say with all our hearts, "Onwards! Our old morality too is part of the comedy!"[5]

In this passage we clearly see that the process of self-overcoming will transform the Superman's worldview from one of seriousness to one of comedy. It is in thinking about the comedic nature of morality in the process of self-overcoming that we see the chief characteristic and driving force of the Joker, humor. From this Nietzsche builds two other concepts that we see in the Joker. Those are *amor fati* and eternal recurrence.

"*Amor fati*" is Latin for the phrase "love of fate." For Nietzsche, it is only when we learn to accept the dark and dangerous that we can start to truly learn about life itself, thus the importance of the love of fate. Using the will to power as a guide, the Superman is able to gain confidence in the fact

that anything can be overcome. With this confidence comes a love of the unknown. No longer is the unknown something to be feared, but rather to be loved. It is only with the unknown and fate that one is able to continually test the self-overcoming will to power. Nietzsche writes, my formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity.[6] The love of fate is something the Joker exhibits on a regular basis through his childlike acceptance of what happens to him and the constant humor that he has the will to overcome any obstacles. We see this again in *BAC*. The Joker is accepting of the disease that is killing him. In fact, he is so accepting of it that he decides to share the sickness with Batman so that they may confront fate together. The love of fate leads to the last characteristic of the Superman, which is eternal recurrence.

Eternal recurrence is the idea that if you had to live your life over again, either in its entirety or a specific instance, you would be able to accept the actions and decisions you have made for all eternity. In order to accept eternal recurrence, the individual must have lived life to its very depths—he must have sought out the darkness and learned to overcome it. This person must have no fear of failure or weakness. He must also realize that the will to power will help him overcome any obstacle. The second part of eternal recurrence is the acceptance and love of fate. Things will happen and we do not have control over the events that happen in the world; we can only accept what comes and overcome it. Essentially, eternal recurrence is the acceptance that a life lived cannot be taken back and that a life lived to the fullest would not be a tragedy to live again. There is a dark side to eternal recurrence as well: a lack of guilt. If a person is following the will to power and self-overcoming, his will needs to engage in some very dark and "evil" acts in order to better understand himself. It is also with eternal recurrence we can see the reason why the Joker has a comical nature. As mentioned above, if done correctly, the process of self-overcoming cultivates a certain elevated perspective. Combine that with the notion that what has happened will happen again in much the same way, we can begin to see how eventually the character of the Superman, and by extension the Joker, will come to see events and life itself with somewhat of a dark sense of humor. With these characteristics of self-overcoming expressed through the will to power, *amor fati*, and eternal recurrence, we can begin to see how the Joker is closely akin to Nietzsche's Superman.

Understanding the Joker in this way is nothing new. Other authors who examine the links between comics and philosophy have proposed similar ideas. Iain Thomson, in his chapter "Deconstructing the Hero" from the book

Comics as Philosophy, provides a more thorough analysis of Nietzsche and the hero. Thomson's analysis stems from a concept put forth by Heidegger that if our heroes show us what we as a society stand for and who we are, then our villains must show us what we are not. Thomson seeks to deconstruct the ideas associated with the hero. He uses for his analysis the iconic graphic novel *The Watchmen*. While the focus here in this chapter is on the Joker, his insights into the relationship between the hero, the villain, and what society deems good are important. Thomson writes,

> Those individuals who would participate in the creation of a more meaningful future need to be inspired by the great heroes of the past, Nietzsche thought, ultimately so as to overcome these heroes and thereby become "overheros"—or better, "superheroes"—that is even greater heroes for the future. The superhero (another Nietzschean conception) is someone who becomes a hero by superseding the hero that inspired him or her.[7]

This is a powerful idea when thinking of the Joker. What we can imagine in this passage is the idea that the hero is something that must be overcome in the movement toward a superhero. For Nietzsche the process of self-overcoming would include the overcoming of the heroes a society holds dear. This concept is reflected in his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which Zarathustra himself overcomes the "higher men" of the day. But there is a twist to this idea, if we consider Batman and the Joker. If Batman represents the hero society holds dear, then his inability to relate to the Joker places the Joker in a position of self-overcoming, conquering the hero of the day in his process toward becoming the Superman. Thomson writes, "By helping us supersede even our greatest past achievements the Nietzschean superhero serves the 'Constant overcoming'—or 'will to power'—whereby 'life keeps itself alive.'"[8] Thomson illustrates a strange twist in the idea of a superhero when viewed from the Nietzschean framework. The superhero must always be in a process of self-overcoming. The idea of self-overcoming strikes directly at the contemporary examples of the hero. This means that in order to overcome the hero the Superman must confront and eventually destroy the hero. In this case, we can see how the Joker is in a constant state of self-overcoming, not only of himself, but of Batman as well. The connection of the Joker and Nietzsche is also taken up directly by Daniel Moseley.

Daniel Moseley, in his chapter "The Joker's Comedy of Existence" from the book *Supervillians and Philosophy*, writes, "The Joker aspires to what the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche calls 'higher values' and he calls for a revaluation

of values. The Joker, in his own way asks us to think of evil as good and think of justice and morality as bad."[9] In this passage, Moseley has illuminated an idea that will be expounded upon later—the idea that the Joker cannot merely be assessed by the typical notions of good, bad, or evil. The Joker himself is beyond those simple distinctions. Although Moseley does a good job of making an initial connection between Nietzsche and the Joker, his analysis does not delve deeper into this relationship. He only examines the Joker with an understanding of the Joker as being beyond good and evil. This analysis does not take into account the characteristics of the Nietzschean Superman from his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* nor the dichotomy between the master and slave moralities. Using only the concept of beyond good and evil, Moseley does not provide a clear picture of the Joker as Nietzschean Superman and merely relegates him to moral monster.

Joker and the Man of *Ressentiment*

The Joker is a force constantly looking to inflict pain and suffering in order to understand something about himself. As mentioned previously, he has a humorous and childlike acceptance of all things that happen to him. In addition, he has the ability to not be discouraged no matter how many times he has been caught. Lastly, he has an unstoppable will to power, the acceptance of fate, and the removal of feelings of guilt and remorse. With understanding the Joker in this way as a complex character, the question then arises: how does his relationship with Batman develop? In order to better understand where Batman fits in this relationship, it is necessary to examine the master and slave moralities and the emergence of the man of *ressentiment*.

The master and slave moralities for Nietzsche develop out of his genealogy of morals. For Nietzsche, morality begins with the terms good and bad. This morality is the morality of the master, the aristocrat, the nobleman. The master morality is one of creating and defining values. If the master or nobleman defines himself as good, then all things associated with him are good. The master does not need approval because he/she creates judgments through actions. Nietzsche writes,

> The Noble type of man experiences itself as determining values; it does not need approval; it judges, "what is harmful to me is harmful in itself"; it knows itself to be that which accords honor to things; it is value creating.[10]

We can see that with the master morality there is no reference to higher things, such as an objective good or religious law. Something is good because it is deemed to be of a similar type to the nobleman. Something is then deemed bad precisely because it is bad to the nobleman. We can see how the Joker would thrive in this type of morality. He defines what he does through actions. This can also be another explanation as to why he never truly expresses nor feels remorse for what he does. The Joker does not view his actions with an eye toward a higher morality; his actions are his morality. Actions advantageous to him are therefore deemed to be good.

The group that is left out of the master morality, however, is the lower classes or the slaves. Since they are the opposite of the nobleman, their characteristics are deemed "bad" in the master morality. Over time what develops then is a revolt of the slave morality. This revolt occurs when the lower classes or the slave classes invert the terms in such a way as to provide groundwork for the slave morality. The slave morality is far more important because it makes a distinction between good and evil, with evil being a subtle yet very important change. The slaves are described by Nietzsche, in his book *Beyond Good and Evil*, as

> the violated, oppressed, suffering, unfree, who are uncertain of themselves and weary . . . the slave's eye is not favorable to the virtues of the powerful; he is skeptical and suspicious, subtly suspicious of all the "good" that is honored . . .[11]

In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche continues to describe the slave morality and its ability to overcome the master morality. Recall that the master morality, also known as the morality of the nobleman, is a morality of action. It is a morality that constructs itself along with the actions of the nobleman. There is no external judgment in the master morality. Judgment occurs during the act. If the end result is good for the nobleman, then the action is good. However, in the slave morality judgment is no longer based on action, but rather in distinction and comparison to a higher power that uplifts the values of the lower classes. Nietzsche characterizes the slave morality as an attempt

> to invert the aristocratic equation . . . saying the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, alone are blessed by God . . . and you, the powerful and noble are on the contrary the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless to all eternity; and you shall be in all eternity the unblessed, accursed, and damned![12]

Thus, we can see the confrontation between the master morality and the slave morality as an interesting parallel to the Joker and Batman. As illustrated above, the Joker is a being of the master morality. He defines what he does by his actions. He does not see himself in relation to a higher morality. He is the judge and evaluator of his actions, no one else. In contrast, Batman illustrates the slave morality as a character driven by a higher purpose. He suffers because of the death of his parents. He seeks justice and is guided by an unwritten code of conduct. It is through the unwritten code, and the codes of conduct that function within the slave morality, by which Batman comes to define the Joker as evil. Batman does this through the juxtaposition of the master morality's idea of good to the slave morality idea of evil. Nietzsche defines evil as "out of the cauldron of unsatisfied hatred—[the master morality] an after production, a side issue, a contrasting shade."[13]

What is interesting about this description is that evil results as a reflection of the good actions in the master morality. In the slave morality, evil is a different shade of the good in the master morality. In fact, the Joker is the embodiment of this shade. Although he often wears a suit, it does not look like a typical suit because of the different colors in it. He is always smiling, but it is not the warm, welcoming smile of the slave morality. Instead, it is the "evil" smile of the Superman. The slave morality and the master morality are in constant struggle with one another. While Nietzsche admits and laments that the master morality is all but extinct he does propose that at times in more "sophisticated" cultures we see the confrontation still happen. It is this confrontation that lies at the heart of why the Joker is such a profound character. The dichotomy between Joker and Batman is incomplete without examining the final piece of the slave morality, which is the idea of *ressentiment*.

Ressentiment is a profound concept and one that the character of the Batman embodies. It is through this embodiment that the Joker gains such a powerful grip on the cultural imagination of the reader. For Nietzsche, "the slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values; the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge."[14] This is the quintessential description of Batman. His actions and behaviors repress and deny his true nature, such as his inability to kill. He is consumed with vengeance in all things. His singular creative act is revenge for the death of his parents. Batman is *ressentiment* embodied. In order for *ressentiment* to exist, according to Nietzsche, there must be a hostile external world. That world is Gotham City, a place replete with actions and deeds that those in the thrall of the slave morality would deem evil: murder, rape,

robbery, a never-ending cesspool of iniquity. Nietzsche writes that the man of *ressentiment*

> is neither upright nor naïve nor honest and straightforward with himself. His soul squints; his spirit loves hiding places, secret paths and back doors, everything covert entices him as his word, his security, his refreshment; he understands how to keep silent, how not to forget, how to wait, how to be provisionally self-deprecating and humble.[15]

It is easy to see how the above is the perfect description of the Dark Knight. The Batman is the man of *ressentiment* due to his dual identity of Bruce Wayne and Batman, which ultimately results in him never being true to himself. Batman is a character who seeks the shadows to hide, whose sole driving force and motivation is the inability to forgive and forget the death of his parents. Batman hides in a cave for his own security, fearful that should his whereabouts be known he might lose something important to him.

Nietzsche's final, most important description of the man of *ressentiment* is that "this type of man needs to believe in a neutral independent 'subject' prompted by an instinct for self-preservation and self-affirmation in which every lie is sanctified."[16] This line is by far the most resounding indictment of Batman as the pinnacle of the slave morality. He is guided by a need for justice. His actions always result from a justification of protecting the innocent or upholding law and order. Even his desire to not kill is a chilling reminder that he is beholden to an ideal that is outside of himself. This objective or higher ideal sanctifies his choices and allows him to justify actions that are sometimes counter to the slave morality according to which he operates. Understanding that the Joker represents the master morality of the Superman confronting the slave morality of Batman's man of *ressentiment*, we can now analyze how this dichotomy plays out in the video game *BAC*. The game illustrates to the player a clear example of the confrontation between the master morality of the Joker and the slave morality of Batman.

The Joker and the Narrative of *Batman: Arkham City*

Batman: Arkham City sets up this dichotomy right away. It opens with Vicki Vale reporting at a press conference outside Arkham City, which is an expanded version of Arkham Asylum and a city in which the criminals run free. There is no "law" within the walls. As Vicki reports, a confident and playful Bruce

Wayne walks by and jokes with Vicki about her calling him a millionaire: "It's billionaire, Vicki. Millionaires are so last season." Immediately, we see the slave morality at play. Law and order surrounds Bruce as he announces his candidacy for mayor in a controlled press conference, expressing his desire to right the wrong of crime in Gotham City. As the scene continues, Bruce is arrested and sent to Arkham City because Hugo Strange wants to get rid of Batman. Here is where we see the beginnings of the struggle.

Arkham City is the embodiment of the master morality. There is no good or evil in Arkham City. The criminals judge each other by deeds, not by a higher authority. This is immediately evident when Bruce is forced to fight a group of Penguin thugs in order to win his freedom. Bruce is judged by his actions rather than by what he says or where he comes from. After this sequence the player finds himself/herself on a rooftop, and this is where the Batman emerges. It is also where we get the first glimpse of the true struggle between the Batman and the Joker.

The Joker is a character who does not wear a mask; his feelings are right out in the open. He is a character in perpetual joy at the challenge of life. He is constantly in motion, seeking the next opportunity. He does not feel remorse because remorse requires a reference to a higher authority that guides one's actions. The Joker is a creator of his own authority, through his actions. Remorse is a feeling of retrospect, and the Superman of the master morality does not look back. It is not a coincidence that the origin of the Joker is unknown. The Joker has no origin because an origin requires that he reflect and question how he came to be, and the Superman does not look back. As Nietzsche writes,

> The spirit of revenge: my friends, that up to now has been mankind's chief concern; and where there was suffering, there was always supposed to be punishment. . . . No deed can be annihilated: how could a deed be undone through punishment?[17]

Lack of reflection is a critical concept in understanding the Joker as the Superman. He cannot feel remorse or seek punishment because he defines himself by his deeds. He cannot look back on what he has done to define his actions as good or bad because he defines his actions as he does them, thus he is incapable of remorse or vengeance because he has nothing to refer those ideas to. In fact, he feels joy; joy in the challenge to overcome a new day. Contrast that with Batman, a character who hides his very identity and follows a code that is greater than himself, even to the detriment of his own health. He is also a character who is called a great detective. A detective is usually

a passive observer of life, a person who sneaks around in the shadows and waits for the right moment to strike. Batman is a person that sees a hostile world and wants to bring it to justice.

The next confirmation the player receives that Arkham City is emblematic of the master morality occurs shortly after Batman saves a paramedic. The paramedic says that he assumed they would be wanted in Arkham City since people were calling for help. This is a false assumption on the part of the paramedic, because he is assuming that pain is something that needs a remedy. The master morality that is at work in Arkham City would not view pain as something that needs a remedy. In fact, for the master morality pain is something that needs to be experienced and overcome, not something to be bandaged and soothed.

Another excellent example that the master morality is at work in Arkham City comes shortly after Batman saves a cop frozen by Mr. Freeze's freeze ray, after falling into the hands of the Penguin. After the rescue, the cop is about to thank God for rescuing him when Batman stops him short and tells him he had better wait on that. Stopping the cop short is evidence that there is no place for God in the master morality of Arkham City. This is primarily because the master morality defines itself within itself through action not in relationship to a higher power. With the emergence of the Joker, the game begins to highlight this dichotomy to its fullest.

When the Joker is first seen, he is dead, sitting in a chair with a heart rate monitor attached. This is both a fake and a symbolic death. The Joker is dead because in the master morality of Arkham City his actions as a noble master are not needed. Since each person is a noble master in Arkham City there is a sort of passing indifference to one another. The Joker is dead when first encountered because nothing fun is happening. However, as soon as Batman arrives, the Joker springs to life and attacks. The meaning of this action is twofold. First, he rises to life because, with the arrival of the man of *ressentiment*, the Joker now has something that can be overcome with his will to power. In addition, now the master morality of the Joker directly confronts the slave morality of Batman. It is in the confrontation that the Joker finds something to do. After the attack, Batman wakes up and finds out that the Joker has infected him with some of his diseased blood. As Nietzsche writes of the noble morality, "How much reverence has a noble man for his enemies . . . ? For he desires his enemy for himself, as a mark of distinction; he can endure no other enemy than one in whom there is nothing to despise and very much to honor."[18] The injection of the blood is followed by a quote from the Joker, who says, "Don't tell me it's not what you always wanted." The Joker

himself, as a master morality, desires his enemy to be part of him. Batman is told he will die from the diseased blood—along with the Joker—if a cure is not found. Batman is unmoved by this, since as long as the Joker dies they will both go together. It is only when the Joker tells Batman that the rest of Gotham is poisoned that Batman is sufficiently motivated to seek a cure. Batman then sets out on a series of fetch quests to retrieve the necessary items to find a cure.

One of these quests is to retrieve a vial of blood from another Batman villain, Ra's al Ghul. In order to confront Ra's, Batman must first pass the Demon trials. Batman meets up with Talia, Ra's only daughter and Batman's true love. She sends him on the Demon trials under one condition, that at the end of the trials he is required to take a life as a rite of passage. Batman agrees to this condition and is sent into the Demon trials. Batman has no trouble completing the trials and is faced with a choice: either kill Ra's al Ghul and take his place as the head of the League of Assassins or to refuse to kill even an enemy. Batman refuses. Talia is visibly upset because he promised her he would kill before the trial began. This is another prime example that Batman is a member of the slave morality and is the embodiment of the man of *ressentiment*. As was described earlier, the man of *ressentiment* has no trouble with deception. In fact, the man of *ressentiment* favors deception because since the slave morality does not have the strength to match the master morality in action, deception and spying become necessary methods of subversion for the slave morality. Not only does he lie to Talia, but she is described as the only woman he ever loved, which means he lies to his true love. It takes a certain level of *ressentiment* to be able to lie to your true love. This type of deception, however, is not out of the norm for the man of *ressentiment*.

The next confrontation between the man of *ressentiment* and the Joker is when the player is actually allowed to fight the Joker hand-to-hand. When this occurs, the immediate reaction the player has is that the Joker has no chance. By this point in the game, the player has taken on far larger groups of enemies and far stronger foes. In fact, the Joker looks almost out of place in this contest. Here stands the man of *ressentiment* stronger and brooding, while the Joker is skinny, diseased, and rather frail. Again, the Joker enters the fight with a smile on his face—he both needs and wants the fight. After all, he respects his enemy with a certain love, and as a process of self-overcoming he must confront the Batman on his terms. However, we cannot expect the Joker to play fair; after all, fairness is a term defined and created by the slave morality. And in the end that is exactly what happens. Faced with his demise, the Joker detonates the ceiling, thereby trapping Batman

under rubble. The only thing th at saves Batman is th e appearance of Talia, who is willing to trade the immortality of the Lazarus pit for Batman's life. The Joker is m ore than willing to accept that trade because again he is th e Superman. One of the chief characteristics of the Superman is th e concept of eternal recurrence, and what is imm ortality other than another form of eternal recurrence?

The final c rescendo of th e str uggle b etween th e m aster m orality of th e Joker and the slave morality of Batman occurs in th e final moments of the game. At one point after the final battle, we see the Joker diseased and dying. Batman is holding the cure in his h and and he says that every decision the Joker has ever made has resulted in death and dying. Batman also admits that even if h e stops the Joker now, the Joker will just break out and do it again. It is a t this m oment that we see the Joker revealed as the self-overcoming will to power of the Superman. The only line he says is: "Think of it as a r unning gag." This simple line has a p rofound influence on the player's view of the Joker. It encapsulates all of the characteristics of the Superman. The Joker accepts that his will to power is continuous and that he cannot be stopped, nor does he really want to be stopped. For the Joker all that is left in life is the humor of one's own position. As Nietzsche writes, "Happiness is the feeling that power increases, that a resistance is overcome, then the Superman will be the happiest man and, as such, the meaning and justification of existence."[19] It is with this quote that we see the Joker in all his glory. The Joker is th e happiest of us all b ecause he constantly (and without end) engages in a process of self-overcoming and basks in his will to power. The Joker then attacks Batman and knocks the cure to the floor, breaking the vial and thus dooming him t o a c ertain death. While the Joker attempts to lick the cure from the floor, Batman, who already has ingested the cure, admits to the Joker that he would have saved him even after all he has done, and the game ends with the faint laughter of the dying Joker—which begs the question, Why is the Joker laughing? The Joker is laughing because in the end it is Batman who is tr uly dead. Batman, who was infected with the master morality through the Joker's blood and eventually cured of it, is the one who lost. Sure, the Joker is dead, but the Joker knows that he has lived a life unfettered by the diseases of the slave morality. In the end, Batman, as the man of *ressentiment*, has succumbed to his repressed natures. He denies his true power, even though it is on display throughout the whole game. In the final scene, we see Batman walking the body of the Joker out of Arkham City. It is in this final scene that we see the triumph of the slave morality over the master morality of the Superman. Batman leaves the master morality of Arkham City and

returns cured of the disease of the will to power and self-overcoming, returning to the order of the higher good of Gotham City.

Understanding the Joker in this way can give us new insight into the relationship and power the Joker has over the reader. The power the Joker has comes from the understanding we all share in feeling that tug of the Superman from within each of us. Through this analysis, in many ways we can come to see the Joker as a superhero rather than the more traditional superhero, Batman. The Joker is a character attempting to rise above and overcome the traditional moralities that enslave Batman. He has accepted his course in life with a comedic laugh and seeks to overcome himself through his will to power.

Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche and R. J. Hollingdale, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book For Everyone and No One* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), 41.
2. Ibid., 27.
3. Ibid., 137–38.
4. Ibid., 137.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (London: Vintage Books, 1967), 21.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil, Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 258.
7. Iain Thomson, "Deconstructing the Hero," in *Comics as Philosophy*, edited by J. McLaughlin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 113.
8. Ibid., 114.
9. Daniel Moseley, "The Joker's Comedy of Existence," in *Supervillians and Philosophy: Sometimes, Evil is its Own Reward*, edited by Ben Dyer (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 132.
10. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 205.
11. Ibid., 207.
12. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 34.
13. Ibid., 40.
14. Ibid., 36.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 46.
17. Nietzsche and Hollingdale, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 162.
18. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 36.
19. Ibid., 27.

THE JOKER PLAYS THE KING

Archetypes of the Underworld in Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*

hannah Mean S-Shannon

Introduction

When the graphic novel *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* was released, it was both a remarkable commercial success and the center of critical debate among fans and scholars who considered it "incomprehensible" or even "pretentious" in its psychological themes.[1] Over fifteen years later, Marc Singer, in his article on "rehabilitating" *Arkham Asylum*, describes the graphic narrative as "almost purely, unbearable symbolic" and blames this lack of realism for maintaining a certain distance from the reader.[2] This is just one of the many ways readers and critics have attempted to explain the work's enigmatic internal unity and comparative isolation within the continuity of the Batman mythos. *Arkham Asylum*, nonetheless, has since sparked a steady tradition of Arkham narratives in its wake, and its highly symbolic visual language continues to haunt the superhero genre, particularly when conveying the role of the underworld as a psychological reality in the Joker-Batman dynamic.

When examining a text replete with psychoanalytical references and mythological motifs, it is appropriate to question the precise mythological role that the Joker plays within this vast psychological metaphor.[3] His authority over Arkham Asylum and its inmates suggests the possibility that he may take his place, in this instance, as a ruler of the underworld. A detailed study of the Joker's role, however, reveals several iterations of Carl Jung's archetypal images within the graphic narrative, including that of the trickster, shadow, and anima. These "versions" of the Joker change during the course of Batman's descent into the unconscious, at last revealing the Joker to be all

of these things in clusively, and therefore a c ollective representation of the unconscious psyche. This collective representation often takes the form of a ruler figure in mythology, and as such, the Joker of *Arkham Asylum* usurps a more regal role and stands alongside figures such as Osiris and Hades as a ruler of the underworld.

An Archetypal Tarot: Trickster, Shadow, Anima, Abyss, Ruler

The Universal Trickster

According to Jung's theories of psychoanalysis, archetypal images exist within the unconscious psyche, interacting on both a personal and collective level with the conscious ego of an individual.[4] As Vyshali Manivannan explains in her chapter, the trickster functions as one of Jung's archetypal images, taking its variant form in relation to its particular society of origin and expressed collectively in both mythology and folklore. Klaus-Peter Koepping defines the common features of a tr ickster figure across cultural divides as a "cunning form of intelligence" and a "grotesqueness of the body imagery used to indicate the inversion of order."[5] By doing so, a trickster creates a "counteruniverse" or "counterworld" to compete with ordinary reality.[6] Lewis Hyde, in his study of widespread trickster motifs, adds an "ability to create or work with contingency," which Hyde considers to be "a mark of trickster's intelligence."[7] The trickster is "both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being, whose chief and most alarming characteristic is his un consciousness."[8] He tends to reflect a lack of unity in body and mind, and "his sex is optional," reflecting a gender fluidity.[9] For all his "defects," he has "prospects of a much higher development of consciousness," reflecting vast potential that could outstrip more limited humanity.[10]

As an archetypal image, the trickster also bears a marked relationship to other aspects of the unconscious. While the trickster represents a collective, social "dark side," it relates to an inner "dark side" known as the shadow. The trickster's relationship to the archetype known as the shadow is particularly important, since "the shadow, although by definition a negative figure, sometimes has certain clearly discernable traits that are "'hiding meaningful contents.'"[11] Behind the shadow may be "hidden" the archetypal expression of "increasingly numinous figures."[12] In this paradigm, "the first thing we find standing behind the shadow is the anima, who is endowed with considerable powers of fascination and possession . . . and hides in her turn the

powerful archetype of the wise old man (sage, magician, king, etc.)"[13] Though the shadow may seem, at first, to be the epitome of opposition, the process of individuation reveals that progress prompts a reversal of conflict with the unconscious, for "the individual shadow contains within itself the seed of an entiodromia, of a conversion into its opposite."[14]

Aspects of the trickster can be seen in Celtic, Greek, and Scandinavian mythology, usually focusing on a central character who expresses opposition to the rational, conscious reality and displays a connection to an otherworldly realm. In the medieval Welsh *Mabinogion* story "Pwyll Prince of Dyfed," Pwyll offends an otherworldly nobleman while out hunting, and attempts to reconcile with him through undertaking a series of favors. Arawn, Prince of Annwn, sets Pwyll a form of test when he suggests that they exchange rulership positions and that Pwyll fights a duel with Arawn's most troublesome foe on his behalf.[15] Arawn, lord of the otherworldly realm of Annwn, acts as a trickster in this instance because he ventures into the "ordinary" world to interact with humanity and suggests required "tests."

Loki, a partial member of the Scandinavian pantheon of Aesir, has long been regarded as one of the few clear Western representations of the trickster motif and has particularly close parallels to psychological models. During his earlier, more jester-like period among the Aesir, Loki is a thief, a prompter of arguments, and a solver of problems. Edda writer Snorri Sturluson describes Loki as "pleasing, even beautiful to look at, but his nature is evil and he is undependable."[16] Sturluson also places Loki in a trickster's traditional role when he writes of Loki's "wisdom known as cunning," and his tendency to be "treacherous in all matters."[17] Loki is connected to the underworld through his ruling daughter Hel, and through him the Norse pantheon contains a very active collective shadow.

Arkham Asylum is no exception in presenting a disruptive but necessary figure who performs a social role but maintains close ties to an otherworldly location. In this case, the Joker is actually the plot facilitator for the entire narrative, as he takes over Arkham Asylum and uses hostages as leverage to lure Batman into the asylum with him on April Fool's Day. The illustrative use of tarot cards in the graphic narrative relates to the presence of archetypal figures, with particular emphasis on the trickster/fool. Tarot cards are introduced into the text as part of the "house of cards" built by Two-Face in the asylum, a tenuous structure figuratively corresponding to the "house" of the asylum itself. As cards appear in the narrative, they form part of the sequence of exploration of the "house" necessary for Batman to undertake, signposting his progress. Early in the narrative, and corresponding to the trickster figure,

we find the Fool card. For Aleister Crowley, whose Thoth tarot deck is used in the narrative, the Fool represents the "equation of the universe, the initial and final balance of opposites," as well as a unification of "the male and the female," with particular connection to the "April Fool" of Spring.[18] Timothy Callahan rightly observes that a modern Joker playing card makes a cameo appearance in Amadeus Arkham's past.[19] Soon afterward in the narrative, however, when Amadeus Arkham describes meeting both Jung and Crowley, the Thoth tarot Fool card also appears in correct Crowleian guise, confirming its symbolic role in the text.[20]

The Joker stages a "Feast of Fools" on April Fool's Day for Batman's arrival at the asylum and operates as the King of Fools in this instance, presiding over the feast and dictating the nature of the festivities. When his relationships are defined socially—that is, when he is interacting with inmates such as Doc Cavendish and Ruth Adams—the Joker makes a show of his trickster aspects.[21] Callahan argues, however, that in this mythical model, based on the reversal of April Fool's Day, it is Batman who plays the "fool" in the text.[22] From the Joker's perspective, dominated by the psyche, Batman has always played the fool, while from Batman's ego perspective observing the Joker, he can only conclude that the Joker is foolish. This duality of position helps explain the opposition of the text and the logic of the reversal of "worlds" taking place, a reversal typical of the trickster's operation.

This trickster-like reversal extends to gender expression. Morrison's Joker was originally intended to appear in a specific drag costume to highlight his sexual ambiguity. While only the Joker's "high heels" remained, his attractive personality is still conveyed, displaying an "absolute confidence that confers upon him a bizarre kind of attractiveness and sexuality."[23] The Joker's sexual ambiguity here reinforces his relationship to several of Jung's archetypes; however, since it is highlighted at the moment that the Joker welcomes Batman into the asylum, it has particular resonance with his initial trickster aspects.

The Personal Shadow

The shadow corresponds to the "personal" unconscious and is tailored to the individual concerned, whereas a collective shadow archetype takes on more universal qualities like that of the trickster.[24] For the individual facing one's own shadow, it "personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself [*sic*] . . . for instance, inferior traits of character and other incompatible tendencies."[25] When this conflict is complete, the final "problem"

of the shadow moves on to the next psychological phase and is "answered on the plane of the anima, that is, through relatedness."[26] In other words, the problem is "answered" through establishing a relationship between the ego and the psyche.

Shadow

The presence of the shadow is particularly defined by opposition to a specific being rather than a generalized group. In the tale "Pwyll Prince of Dyfed," Arawn initially introduces a point of contention between him and Pwyll, displaying hostility and threatening to "dishonor" him for his behavior.[27] Through a series of "tests," Pwyll regains his good will. The realm of Annwn is governed by seemingly illogical laws, such as the fact that striking a man twice is less likely to result in his death than striking him once. Pwyll must accept this lack of logic in order to succeed, and this acts as an "initiation" for Pwyll into another form of reality.

Like Arawn, the Greek figure Hades expresses both menacing and initiatory aspects; conflicting epithets hint at both his grandeur as well as his malevolent potential.[28] If we delve more deeply into Hades's origins, we find that he is Zeus's brother and therefore a "counterpart of Zeus."[29] This duality is particularly important in establishing his expression of the shadow, since the shadow must have a specific oppositional partner. Like Hades and Zeus, the Scandinavian figures Odin and Loki form a duality, in this case "blood brothers." However, Loki also fathers three children who represent a threat to the survival of the gods at the battle of Ragnarok: Hel, the Midgard Serpent, and Fenrir the Wolf.[30] Loki's daughter, Hel, who Odin endows with rule of the underworld, physically resembles both the living and the dead: "half dark blue and half flesh color," suggesting her own form of duality. Her close relationship to Loki also confirms her place as part of the shadow paradigm.[31]

The use of the Moon tarot card in *Arkham Asylum* is a guiding thematic element, both narratively and visually, and corresponds to the initial phase of Batman's encounter with the shadow when entering the asylum. Morrison quotes Crowley in his script, presenting the "path" of the Moon as the "threshold of life" and "threshold of death," representing the beginning of an initiation process into the mysteries of life and death.[32] Also drawn from the tarot card's imagery is a guardian statue of Anubis, under which Batman passes before entering the asylum.[33]

When Amadeus Arkham is introduced into the narrative, he becomes a clear embodiment of the shadow at an earlier period in the asylum's history,

a person whose "shadow is huge."[34] Amadeus's struggle with the shadow, undertaking his own path of initiation, results in a loss of self when he fails to assimilate the shadow and is instead subsumed by it. When Doc Cavendish says that Amadeus "knew that only ritual, only magic could contain the bat," he refers to the attempt of an initiated member of the underworld to control its forces.[35] The Joker, however, displays a much more personal form of opposition to Batman than Amadeus. In *Arkham Asylum*, the Joker's insightfulness and exploitation of Batman's own psychological imbalances reaches new heights. As Morrison says, the Joker is "overtly provocative," engineering his actions to cause the most "discomfort."[36] Morrison's notes clarify the Joker's shadowy role, appearing at the gates of Arkham to welcome Batman, as that of "the irrational dark side of us all."[37]

Batman also undertakes several "tests" at the hands of the Joker, beginning, in fact, before his arrival at the asylum. The first is the test of his selflessness, dictating whether he will enter the asylum to save the Joker's hostage, Pearl. Once inside, however, the Joker subjects Batman to both an inkblot test and a word-association test; significantly, each is a psychoanalytical tool practiced by Jung in his early career.[38] The testing here also suggests that Batman's initiation is underway, beginning the descent into his unconscious psyche.

Even within the "initiatory" phase of the narrative in *Arkham Asylum*, however, Morrison hints that the Joker's role is greater than simply an archetypal image of the trickster or the shadow. Ruth Adams suggests that the Joker possesses a form of "super-sanity" that enables him to exchange personalities when necessary, an ability described in Morrison's notes as "the next stage in human consciousness development."[39] The idea that the Joker may be more psychologically evolved than Batman lends credence to the Joker's function in *Arkham Asylum* as a psychological guide (see, for example, Kristen M. S. Bezio's discussion elsewhere in this volume).

The Engaging and Conflicting Anima

As Jung warns, the anima represents "everything that a man can never get the better of and never finishes coping with," and it fluctuates in its expression of gender depending on the individual and the psychological situation encountered.[40] The anima also contains seemingly opposite positive and negative elements in conflict, representing both a chaotic life-urge and also life's darker aspects, particularly death. If the shadow represents the "dark side" in man, the anima represents a two-part being, containing both good and

evil in a dynamic relationship. This illustrates Jung's idea that "everything that works is grounded in its opposite," and that "in all disorder" there is a "secret order."[41] The anima can also act as "psychopomp, a mediator between the conscious and the unconscious and a personification of the latter"; therefore, it has mythological associations with both the worlds of the living and the dead.[42]

When first encountered, the anima provokes resistance; however, acceptance of relatedness results in a more positive phase, creating a new and helpful dynamic between the conscious and unconscious mind. When Pwyll negotiates with Arawn and agrees to travel to Annwn to undertake the "favors" asked of him, the positive aspects of Arawn become apparent. Once the tasks are complete, the return of each ruler to their own realm does not mark the end of this unusual interlude between two worlds, but rather the beginning of a flow of goods and communication between them, and a "bond of friendship" beneficial to both.[43] When Snorri Sturluson describes Loki as "pleasing, even beautiful to look at," but having an "undependable" personality, he hits on the dualism inherent in the anima, which can be an alluring life force or a destructive foe capable of inconsistency. If "relatedness" breaks down, the anima can become an even more destructive oppositional force than the shadow, as seen in Loki's association with Ragnarok.[44] In Egyptian mythology, Osiris represents the beneficial aspects of life even in death.[45] Osiris, murdered by his brother, Seth, and dismembered, was "resurrected" by judgment of the gods to be "king and judge of the dead" and can be recognized by his iconography—including a crown, crook, and flail, as well as the tendency for his skin to be rendered black or green to represent the "cycle of death and regeneration."[46] His duality, carrying both potential destruction and resurrection, hints that Osiris, too, is an underworld ruler with attributes of the anima.

In keeping with the dualism of the anima, two tarot cards reflect these attributes within *Arkham Asylum*. The first card that appears is that of the Hanged Man, associated with initiations into deeper mysteries of the underworld, and appearing as part of the large tableaux depicting the Feast of Fools.[47] Crowley associates this card with "the spiritual function of water in the economy of initiation; it is a baptism which is also a death."[48] This card reflects the first phase of encounter with the anima, which contains struggle, whereas the second associated tarot card—that of the Lovers—suggests the second phase of dualism brought into harmony. This "relatedness," depicted on one of the tarot cards used to build Two-Face's house of cards, is the goal of the "sacrifice."[49] The Lovers, or as Crowley calls them "The Brothers,"

represent a "uni on" o r "m arriage" o f op posites th at c ould in clude th e m ale and female principles, "produces life," and is therefore a regenerative sign.[50]

A p ossible jun ction w herein th e "ini tiation" p hase o f B atman's c onflict with th e sh adowy J oker shif ts t o a s earch f or th e "m ysteries"—which th e Joker as anima could reveal—occurs when Batman undertakes an act of "bloodletting," driving a shard of glass from a mirror through his hand. This scene is rendered ritualistic by McKean, who extends what might have been a single panel into two pages containing multiple panels depicting the action and the results.[51] This represents the first conflict-based encounter with the anima, an evocation of the "hanged god" ritual that results in an altered perception of the anima. The second phase occurs when Batman finds that he must call for "help" from Ruth Cavendish to be rescued from Doc Cavendish's strangling grip.[52] It is telling that a female figure comes to Batman's rescue, a kind of proxy anima for the mysteriously absent Joker. As Morrison explains concerning Batman's development: "From a Jungian POV, his anima has vanquished his shadow. He has merged with his own myth—the Death Bat—and become part man, part numinous legend."[53] In other words, the tensions within B atman's un conscious h ave b een a t l east p artly r esolved. B atman's struggle with the anima has led to a final acceptance of "help" and his need for grace. Accepting the "relatedness" of the anima has enabled a union in his identity between otherwise incompatible and mutually destructive forces.

Abyss

Kathryn Wood Madden suggests that the image of the "abyss" may best represent the "deepest" layer of the unconscious, a unifying element that contains both th e un conscious an d c onscious min d.[54] A s a " ground" u pon w hich all other archetypes of the collective unconscious seem to rest, the abyss forms both a boundary between the known and the unknown and also an enclosed space in which more differentiated aspects of the unconscious operate, such as the shadow and anima. It is therefore associated with the "lowest" level of psychological descent into th e un derworld o f th e un conscious, b eyond encounter with the shadow and the anima and representing the totality of the unconscious psyche.

The abyss of the deep unconscious in which psychological journeys operate is particularly associated with figures who contain a totality of archetypal features, such as rulers of the underworld. Their personal nomenclature and that of their realms are often interchangeable, as well as the features thereof. The realm into which Pwyll travels appears similar to the world of humans,

but it is superlative in its qualities. Arawn's city displays the "greatest show of buildings anyone had ever seen."[55] While Annwn, which can be variously rendered in translation as "not world" or "underworld," was later identified as Hell in Christian tradition, in stories such as this one it takes on earlier numinous qualities of a land of "wonders" beyond life and death, transcending both.[56] The Greco-Roman concept of Hades as both a funerary deity and a place for the dead is perhaps the most pervasive Western concept when the "underworld" is discussed. He is king of an underworld also known as the "house of Hades."[57] The realm of Hades includes "gates" guarded by the three-headed hound Cerberus, and "upper" and "lower" realms known as Erebus and Tartarus, respectively. Beneath this great depth, significantly, lies the "abyss . . . where a man could fall for a year and not touch bottom."[58] He who governs the upper and lower realms also governs the abyss and any travelers or subjects therein. Loki's daughter, Hel, governs a kingdom that contains an immense hall with a threshold called "falling to peril."[59] Her realm is situated within the wider gloomy sphere of "Niflheim" or "fogworld" and is particularly reserved for those who die of old age or illness.[60] To pass through the gates that reach her hall, one must also traverse vast distances and wild landscapes.[61] The vastness contained in her kingdom, and within which her realm is situated, suggests the "abyss" imagery of other underworld kingdoms, and the interchangeability of her own features and those of her realm also reinforces her absolute authority there.

Arkham Asylum, a "high security mental facility" established by Amadeus Arkham in an attempt to treat the criminally insane in a more humane manner, is also the stage for Amadeus's family tragedy and developing insanity.[62] Within the "house" of tarot cards built by inmate Two-Face, the Universe tarot card occupies a mysterious position, briefly presented during the dual-page splash of the Feast of Fools. According to Crowley, this card is the "compliment of the Fool" and represents an end point, just as the Fool represents a starting point, but signifies the "building of a house of matter" in which the "Great Work" of the unification of polarities can be "accomplished."[63] This "Great Work" is the prime concern of Batman's psychological descent, and the environment in which it can take place is the temporary ritual space, the "house" of the abyss.

Arkham Asylum is both a "house," as well as a world characterized by "magic and terror" and "mysterious symbols."[64] The symbolism of Arkham Asylum itself as not only a ritual space but a psychological space is expressed most iconically when Amadeus discovers the severed head of his daughter peering out from the windows of her doll house, an image which suggests

that "the Abyss gazes also."[65] Arkham further confirms the house's personality, one associated with the unconscious world, when he describes it as "an organism, hungry for madness" and a "maze that dreams."[66]

The tarot house of cards which Two-Face destroys at the conclusion of the narrative indicates the ritualized completion of the rite of transformation consisting of not one but several steps, and hints that the asylum itself may have functioned as a construct with a limited time frame for this specific activity. The graphic novel's subtitle, "a serious house on serious Earth," is a quote from Phillip Larkin's poem "Church Going," which is about an abandoned place of worship, and introduces Arkham Asylum itself as a ritual space. The cover art for the fifteenth-anniversary edition of the text presents Batman entering the asylum through an opening that is both door and mouth, overlaid with the Joker's face—clarifying an identification between the place and the Joker himself, an association typical of underworld mythology—while at other points in the text the entire "space" seems to refer to the "head" of Batman.[67] This pattern of association reflects Batman's initially divided psychology, wherein a shadowy figure, the Joker, rules over his unconscious (the asylum itself) and within which he struggles to develop a helpful relationship with the unconscious.

As Morrison explains, at the end of the narrative, "Batman has faced his own personal Abyss, integrated his psychological demons and emerged stronger and more sane from the other side of the looking glass."[68] Early in the script, Batman voices his fear of the link between himself and the asylum: "I'm afraid it'll be just like coming home."[69] This fear can only be dispelled through interaction with and a restructuring of the meaning of the asylum to Batman, and the degree to which the place becomes "home" is established through his struggle there.

Ruler

Underworld rulers or kings may express a number of traits that manifest in differing situations, and therefore can be interpreted as containing various potential archetypal images rather than being limited to a single role. Their prime feature, however, is definitive decision-making in jurisdiction or alliance. In Jungian terms, they represent the totality of the unconscious, as well as the ability of the unconscious to direct itself in communication with the ego consciousness to express its autonomy. The ruler of the underworld will indicate its equal or dominant status in relation to the conscious ego and negotiations are necessary to secure a balanced relationship between the two.

When Pwyll interacts with Arawn, he is persuaded that Arawn's rank is superior to his own, demanding respect and accommodation. Pwyll assumes the position of the ruler of Hades and thereafter finds him to be an amiable ally. The dualism is neatly harmonic: Pwyll rules in the land of the conscious and the living while Arawn rules in the land of the unconscious and the dead, thereby forming a formidable alliance. Myths involving Hades emphasize his jurisdiction in his unwillingness to let the souls of the dead, or those of mortal visitors, leave his kingdom easily.[70] Kerenyi also notes that Hades appears most often in tales of heroes or gods who go on journeys to his realm, and that the main factor determining whether these beings return from Hades's realm is their status as either initiated or uninitiated into the Eleusian mysteries of eternal life.[71] While the "uninitiated" face menial, tedious tasks when they remain in Hades, such as carrying water in a sieve, the initiated can pass to the more pleasant Elysian fields.[72] Osiris is predominantly thought of as a savior figure due to the welcoming aspects of his cult, but his vast authority is also emphasized since all "have to come to him in the end."[73] As the first being to be made whole in the afterlife through mummification, Osiris conveyed to his followers a "certain hope of the resurrection in an immortal, eternal, and spiritual body."[74] Just like Hades, however, he determines the fate of those who die and pass to his realm without mummification, those not "initiated" into his mysteries, and those who, through appealing to his rites, can hope for resurrection. Hel's role, meanwhile, compares more closely to the Hades of classical myth. She remains in her realm, preventing souls from leaving, as is the case with the murdered Baldr. Though Odin sends his messenger Hermod to attempt to negotiate with Hel for the release of Baldr, through Loki's intervention negotiations fail and Baldr remains with Hel in his "seat of honor."[75] The extent of her final authority is clear, thwarting even Odin himself.

Batman's own descent into the underworld is heralded when the Tower appears as Two-Face's final tarot card placed in the house of cards. According to Crowley, it represents the "destruction of existing material by fire" as beings are "emancipat[ed]" from the "prison of organized life" to start over.[76] Consequently, the Tower can represent a necessary cleansing destruction and asserts the restructuring of Batman's psyche through the experience of his descent. Batman's "descent" is complete when he affirms his reconciled relationship with the anima and concludes, "Arkham was right: sometimes it's only madness that makes us what we are."[77] Without this understanding, and his commission of Two-Face to make a coin flip decision concerning his release, Batman would not have truly "passed" the trials of Arkham and arrived at the "bedrock" of his personality.[78]

The Joker's own role is hinted at when he asks Batman if he has "come to claim . . . kingly robes" or if he wishes simply to be "put out of [his] misery."[79] The dual possibilities presented here are paradigmatic in mythology: Batman is being offered rule of the underworld, as a kind of successor to the Joker, or the option to choose death, the prerogative of the realm, by which he would become one of its citizens. The Joker is unaccountably pleased by Batman's suggestion that Harvey Dent flip a coin to decide, perhaps because the situation of "relatedness" between Batman and the Joker has already been established.[80] Batman speaks as an initiate, and not as one of the "uninitiated" who, venturing into the underworld, must remain as one of its subjects.

As Morrison describes, "The Joker's role as a Trickster/Guide through the underworld is no more apparent than here, where he seems happy to let Batman go. The Joker's work is done, he has broken and remade his old enemy."[81] This is the sole prerogative of an underworld's ruler, granting passage between the worlds of the living and the dead based upon whatever "tests" he deems necessary, and therefore this confirms the Joker's status within *Arkham Asylum* as a suitable king of the unconscious. Though the Joker assumes many guises appropriate to Batman's psychological journey, it is only through looking "behind" each one that Batman continues to descend more deeply into his own psyche, thereby locating the center of this underworld and its ruler.

Conclusion: Arkham's Afterlife

In subsequent works dealing with the asylum, central concepts of *Arkham Asylum* return to their psychological foundations. In "The Clown at Midnight Interlude" episode from Morrison and Kubert's *Batman and Son*, the reader learns that the Joker has "changed again. . . . He has no real personality, remember, only a series of 'superpersonas.'"[82] In Sam Kieth's *Arkham Asylum: Madness*, the connection between the Joker and the asylum as his domain is again emphasized when the Joker can "feel" the asylum's state of being, and muses that he may be the "only one holding it all together."[83] Wider Arkham Asylum tradition now asserts that "madness seemingly leeches from its walls," and this has been confirmed by the highly successful video games *Batman: Arkham Asylum* and *Batman: Arkham City*, which continue to credit the Joker as the doyen of Arkham.[84] As in Morrison's graphic narrative, the association between the "kingdom" and its ruler remain intact as part of a

deeply psychological paradigm that gives the Arkham Asylum mythos its enduring qualities.

Grant Morrison explains that the struggle between the Joker and Batman in *Arkham Asylum* "seemed a much richer, more satisfying and more adult way to consider the Batman/Joker dynamic" than a simple binary of practical crime-fighting.[85] According to Morrison's logic, while the Joker's activity in the world of the collective consciousness may continue to express trickster features, in Arkham Asylum's collective unconsciousness he will continue to express the qualities of a ruler. Batman, likewise, will continue to be permanently affected—by his encounter with the shadow, his negotiations with the anima, and his truce, however temporary, with the ruler of the underworld. Returning to the asylum subsequently will be a less fearful act for Batman, and interaction between the Joker and Batman will pivot upon certain points of mutual understanding. In *Arkham Asylum*, the Joker fully articulates his own necessity in the Batman mythos, as part of the "universal law of coexisting opposites"; whether these opposites will create devastating or negotiable conflicts depends almost entirely upon whether Batman can recognize a ruler of the underworld behind various lesser "masks" when he sees one.[86]

Notes

1. Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (New York: DC Comics, 1989), n.p.; Grant Morrison, *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), 228.

2. Marc Singer, "A Serious House on Serious Earth: Rehabilitating Arkham Asylum," *International Journal of Comic Art* 8, no. 2 (2006): 270.

3. Carl Jung and Aleister Crowley, as well as tarot cards from Crowley's deck, appear figuratively in the graphic narrative of our text. These symbolic elements are partly discussed and defined by Grant Morrison's "full-script" version, with notes, that was issued on the fifteenth anniversary of the original graphic narrative. While Morrison intentionally harnesses the symbolism of Jung's archetypes and the tarot cards for the narrative, his commentary is intentionally generalized to leave room for reader interpretation. This study will look for deeper and more sustained patterns relevant to Jungian analysis than Morrison provides.

4. Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), n.p.

5. Klaus-Peter Koepping, "Absurdity and the Hidden Truth: Cunning Intelligence and Grotesque Body Images as Manifestations of the Trickster," *History of Religions* 24, no. 3 (1985), 194.

6. Ibid., 194.

7. Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), 97.

8. Carl Jung, "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure," in *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, edited by Paul Radin (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 203.

9. Ibid., 204.

10. Ibid.

11. Jung, "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure," 210.

12. Ibid., 210.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 211.
15. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones, eds., *The Mabinogion* (London: Everyman Library, 1997), 3.
16. Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 38.
17. Ibid., 39.
18. Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Thoth* (San Francisco, CA: Weiser Books, 2008), 53, 56.
19. Timothy Callahan, *Grant Morrison: The Early Years* (Edwardsville, IL: Sequart Research and Literacy Organization, 2008), 51; Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, *Batman: Arkham Asylum 15th Anniversary Edition* (New York: DC Comics, 2004), 43.
20. Morrison and McKean, *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, 46.
21. Ibid., 32–33.
22. Callahan, *Grant Morrison: The Early Years*, 51.
23. Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, "Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth, Full Script and Notes," in *Batman: Arkham Asylum 15th Anniversary Edition* (New York: DC Comics, 2004), 12.
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MAKING SENSE SQUARED

Iteration and Synthesis in Grant Morrison's Joker

Mark P. Williams

Introduction: Who Laughs Longest

In Grant Morrison's *Batman* prose narrative, "The Clown at Midnight," Harley Quinn declares the Joker "the PICASSO of crime! The Great Modernist in a postmodern tradition!" whose innovation and creativity "will spawn SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT!!"[1] This chapter will take this view of the Joker seriously (at least in part): it will explore how Quinn's perspective relates to Morrison's critical use of the Joker to engage with the cultural politics of comic books through its approach to what Duncan Falconer and Marc Singer have both termed the "prismatic" aspect of contemporary comic book publishing. Falconer designates the current body of superhero narrative continuity the "Prismatic Age" after the Gold, Silver, Bronze, and (arguable) Dark Ages, while Singer concentrates on analyzing the presence of a "prismatic style" in Morrison's work.[2] Both of these instances refer to the increased tendency towards employing alternate universe narratives to explore the characterization of superheroes. An obvious consequence of this is that it means any potential narrative *could* happen, but at the same time means that *all* narratives that *do* happen are also potentially reversible or infinitely rebootable, and are therefore flattened out to the same consistency. I argue that Morrison's response to this ought to be described primarily as multiversal, based on Michael Moorcock's innovation of a multiverse of recurring character types developed during the 1960s, which informs his experimental work for the "New Wave" as well as his pulp fantasy novels. In Moorcock's multiverse, characters such as Elric of Melniboné and Ulrich von Bek, Jerry Cornelius and Jherek Carnelian, each echo one another as aspects or dimensions of the same underlying form—their singularity is sometimes known as the Eternal

Champion, an emergent figure never reducible to being either a collective of them or being more authentically present in any one version. Morrison draws explicitly on Moorcock, and Jerry Cornelius in particular, in *The Invisibles: Entropy in the UK*, and has repeatedly alluded to his work in interviews. This chapter will situate Morrison's Batman/Joker relationship as a multiversal way of reading the prismatic narrative structure of contemporary superhero narrative through play with iteration and synthesis. I suggest that not only does Morrison characterize the Joker as a uniquely insightful figure, but he provides a new set of structural, narrative, and symbolic reasons why Batman *requires* the Joker in order to *be* Batman.

Prismatic or Multiversal: Agent, Personification, and Essence

Although I am referring to Morrison's Joker as a singular entity, collapsing distinctions between the early Joker of *Arkham Asylum* and the later *Batman and Robin*, it is important to realize that Morrison's specific usage of the Joker presupposes a multiplicity within the singular, and also a common singularity of multiple versions of the Joker. I first identify three key Joker functions in Morrison's *Batman* narratives: 1) Joker as agent; 2) Joker as personification; and 3) Joker as essence. These separations are complicated, however, by how Morrison combines them within his plots and subplots as either iterations or syntheses of earlier versions of the Joker (his own and other writers). In "The Clown at Midnight" and *Batman R.I.P.*, the Joker is a personification of decadence consuming itself, recycling earlier forms, who may also have self-reflexive, quasi-metafictional qualities. At other times, the Joker is an abstract "force of chaos" whose presence causes or precipitates instability,[3] so that even when he is not physically present he is represented by "Joker Venom," his own "legendary Joke-book," and ultimately a "Joker-virus."[4]

The combination of these approaches culminates in what I think forms Morrison's overarching formulation: Joker as *initiation rite*. All of these approaches are underpinned by Morrison's consistent interest in exploring the capacity of the superhero narrative to disseminate critical thought on both contemporary society and its own form. Therefore, I will begin by outlining how Morrison's Joker relates directly to his wider interest in the critical power of superhero narrative.

The Morrison Methodology

Morrison's approach to writing for superhero comic books has long been associated with a certain experimental impulse, from the avant-gardist inflections of *Doom Patrol* to the metafictions of *Animal Man*. With his work on *Seven Soldiers of Victory*, *Final Crisis*, and *Batman*, it becomes increasingly clear that these methods, together with the nonlinear storytelling and psychedelic imagery explored in *The Invisibles* (and refined to striking effect in *The Filth* and *Joe the Barbarian*), are central to how he views not just his own writing processes, but the reading process, and even the social purpose of superhero comic books.

Morrison's comic book writing situates itself alongside its readership in an important respect: when reading *Batman* narratives we are reading a set of interpretive coordinates within a field known as *"Batman,"* which has a complex and contradictory narrative history variously treated as canonical or non-canonical according to editorial direction. This history is, in turn, selectively reinterpreted by other writers and artists who are simultaneously producing non-congruent new material. Morrison's approach to these determining conditions of production is distinctive: his *Batman* plots provide space for non-congruent narratives to intrude and interact with his own through his personal prismatic style. His Joker is particularly important in this regard because he provides a form of characterization appropriate to the prismatic style: a multiversal subjectivity which can adapt to the multiple and contradictory reality of the superhero universe. Morrison's Batman learns from the Joker both how to live with his contrary histories as a Golden Age, Silver Age, Bronze, or Dark Age character *and* how to adapt to his contemporary prismatic moment. The Joker reinterprets himself or characterizes himself against his history in terms that expressly recall this: "Satire Years," "Camp," "New Homicidal."

The relationship Morrison posits between Batman and the Joker, and, in particular, the perspective he offers on the Joker's subjectivity, narrativize this process at the same time as his non-linear episodic approach to writing works within it; the Joker is his reflexive subject for contemporary superhero comic books, a being embedded within an imaginative framework structured by the simultaneous iteration and synthesis who is directly analogous to media culture and the commodity form, and, crucially, who understands how to make a way of life out of that situation.

Morrison's superhero narratives perform their central conflicts through play with the opposing forces of cyclicality and progress that characterize the

form's relationship with its history and its present. These are what Umberto Eco calls its "mythic" and "historical" aspects, which produce a central tension of the form as a fiction and as a commodity: a constant desire for novelty coupled with the economic pressure towards iteration of established motifs.[5] Contrary dependencies on iteration and novelty are common to other long-running populist narratives, from *Varney the Vampire* and Sherlock Holmes stories to contemporary computer games and television series, but they are peculiarly accentuated in the case of superhero narratives. It is the superhero story's specific contemporary nuances which Morrison narrativizes: an epistemology floating between science fiction and fantasy modes coupled to a cultural politics caught between readings which tend to locate it as complicit in triumphant imperialism or embedded in an idealist, or idealized, liberationism—all of these can be found in his superhero narratives, but they are thrown up in starkest relief in his *Batman* stories. Morrison's view of the Joker's psyche is key to this and it, in turn, informs the way he reinterprets Batman as a response to the Joker, to such an extent that he reimagines Batman's psyche as a direct adaptation of the Joker's without the homicidal tendencies.

Morrison's perspective on the relationship of superhero narratives to postmodernity is very similar to that articulated by Steve Beard in respect to contemporary media culture. In *Logic Bomb*, Beard, from his own dual position as a theorist and journalist, characterizes media culture as an "integrated circuit" of seemingly infinite reversibility where constant shock and reassessment maintains, rather than subverts, the status quo. Beard explains that a media culture is a culture of spectacle where apparent crisis and unsettling change characterize shifts in fashion, in surface detail, not in deep structure. Apparently subversive acts of "appropriation or infiltration" are "recycled back into the media" becoming markers of a reiteration of the norm, not indicators of revolutionary upheaval—this is a reversal of the Situationist International's attempt to critique spectacular society. For Beard, "the provocative spectacles of the Situationist" and supposedly radical "customizations of the subcultural consumer" ultimately only satiate and (re)produce an "appetite for the scandalous and the freakish."[6]

Morrison treats the prismatic "continuity" of contemporary superhero narratives as paradigmatic of this culture of spectacle because they depend on a similar set of economic and cultural pressures: regular publication; multiple contributors; multiple coexisting (and increasingly) non-congruent stories; the constant expectation of similitude coupled to constant desire for innovation. In his superhero narratives, this tension appears dramatized as

conflict between forces of endless appropriation and reappropriation, and forces of destructive or emancipatory transformation. Morrison's writing clearly recognizes these nested, dichotomous demands as being directly analogous to the central relationship between Batman and the Joker. His *Batman* narratives make this series of double binds, linked to the subversion and/or co-option of "characters" and "plots," central, and the Joker is his key player; he forms an embedded reflection on the conditions of superhero narrative production. Morrison's Joker has internalized the prismatic or multiversal form: he is non-congruent *with(in) him-Self*.

In Morrison's Batman narratives, it is the Joker's ability to adapt his personality to the constant emergence of new supervillains, which stands for the structural code of the superhero narrative itself,[7] that makes him a threat to the stability of the relationship. The Joker upsets the structural code, and in so doing demonstrates to Batman, and to the reader, the primacy of that structural code. Morrison's Joker teaches Batman—his Batman learns from his Joker through experiential inter-subjective encounters, or initiations—how to regain agency against the totalizing backdrop of endless ultimate enemies who operate according to a similar totalizing model of spectacle and perpetual reversibility.

A Superheroic Critical Aesthetic: Joker as Agent and Personification

Morrison's Joker is taken into the confidence of Dr. Hurt, so by the time Morrison's reader begins to explore the mystery of who Simon Hurt really is, the Joker already has privileged information over Dick Grayson and Damian Wayne—and over Bruce Wayne.[8] The contradictory characterization and mysteries surrounding Dr. Hurt span both the arc of *The Black Glove* and *Batman R.I.P.* In the former, Hurt apparently tells the Joker his history, which is then elaborated while the mystery of his origins is reiterated in *Batman R.I.P. The Missing Chapter*, before continuing to span the two parallel series, *Batman and Robin* and *The Return of Bruce Wayne*. During these series, the Joker largely operates behind the scenes, but when he emerges he appears to have a level of knowledge about the secret working of Dr. Hurt's world that is comparable with Morrison's. So, when, in *Batman and Robin*, the Joker says to Damian Wayne that he is "making sense squared," his statement takes on the qualities of a metafictional address to the reader.[9] The Joker suggests that what appears disorderly or chaotic from a linear reading in relative

isolation—as a one-issue or three-issue arc might seem self-contained but disorderly in context of a wider series—is actually based on a nonlinear and self-reflexive model of reading. I suggest that Morrison is following a similar line to Reza Negarestani's Lovecraftian theory-fiction *Cyclonopedia*, encouraging us to read the meta-text (or meta-narrative) of the wider world of the fiction (in this case superhero continuity) to find and join together its plot holes via the concept of "( )hole complexes."[10] These are Lovecraftian spaces within metanarratives which speak of unseen, unsettling, or subversive connections between apparently disparate events. Negarestani's chapter on "the poromechanics of horror," where he develops this concept, appeared alongside Morrison's stylized novella *Luvkraft vs Kutulu*, itself set in the uncertain, ungrounded space of R'lyeh (in *Songs of the Black Wurm Gism*, D. M. Mitchell's sequel to *The Starry Wisdom: A Tribute to H. P. Lovecraft*).[11] Morrison's exposure to Negarestani's "( )hole complexes" and linking plot holes in contemporary (meta)narratives coincides with a point when Morrison is in the midst of writing his definitive *Batman* narrative, wherein he explicitly sets out to link seventy years of inconsistent narratives through the repressed or editorially rejected plot holes in superheroic continuity. The characterization of Dr. Hurt as Batman's ultimate (hidden) enemy may be one result of this. Throughout the arcs dealing with the "Black Glove," Dr. Hurt calls himself "the hole in things" at the point where he has already confided in the Joker regarding his motivation and origins.[12] Tellingly, the Joker's assertion to Damian Wayne that he is "making sense squared" appeared in a *Batman and Robin* issue when the episodic time-travel narrative of *The Return of Bruce Wayne* was simultaneously revealing Dr. Hurt's earlier aliases and original identity—the gaps or holes in one narrative series, its poromechanics, unfold correspondences with the other series, correspondences of which the Joker is already aware. The Joker speaks sense in more dimensions than the other characters because he is conscious of the ( )hole complex(es) in things.

The Joker is effectively personifying Morrison's ideal reader and explaining his method. As Morrison writes in the introduction to *The Black Casebook*, he approached *Batman* by taking "the entire publishing history of Batman" as a single "rough timeline" through which he could then "compress 70 years" worth of Batman's adventures into a frantic fifteen years.[13] He then adds to the complexity of this by incorporating time travel and alternative universe variations into what is supposedly the same timeline. To adapt to this, Morrison's major innovation from earlier series such as *The Invisibles* is to subject both the pictorial and verbal representations to simultaneous narrative and epistemological doubt. Each key scene from each episodic

narrative may potentially be: a representation from a singular perspective around which we are focalized, as in Dr. Hurt's reimagining of the killings of the Wayne family from *Batman and Robin* #13 (either a fantasy or delusion within Hurt's mind); an approximation of a Platonic Real and therefore ultimately unrepresentable event, as with Dick Grayson's encounter with Barbatos under Wayne Manor (where a giant bat stands in for an encounter with a creature from a higher order or alternative plane of existence); or an incomplete or fragmentary narrative, a technique which facilitates retrospective returns such as *Batman R.I.P.: The Missing Chapter* (in which case all the elements of the narrative must be taken as individually Real to the characters and world of Batman). What is most distinctive (and disruptive) about this prismatic approach is that Morrison makes these possible explanations potentially fungible—the next iteration of the scene might force us to exchange interpretative positions. This aesthetic of prismatic doubt and fungibility forces Morrison's reader to engage with each episode through a profound hermeneutics of suspicion where the interpretation of individual elements in each episode, arc and series remains open (and potentially reversible) until they have reached the very end of Morrison's current work on the characters (*and always potentially beyond*). This necessitates the reader taking on certain of the Joker's approaches to the structure of the superhero narrative: to treat it as either absurd or fantastical, surreal or hyperreal, or simply disjointed. In these ways, Morrison's use of iteration and synthesis demand the reader's awareness of the forces of literary and artistic production that determine the superhero form.

In exploring the Batman/Joker relationship across the narrative arcs of *Batman and Son*, *Batman R.I.P.*, *Batman and Robin Reborn*, and individual episodes such as *Time and the Batman*, Morrison has developed a collage approach to preexisting elements, creating new juxtapositions which counterpoint his prismatic doubt. Throughout the above series, the Batman/Joker dynamic forms a persistent subplot to main plots concerning the appearance of a new ultimate enemy, first the Black Glove and then Leviathan. In *Batman R.I.P.*, the Joker taunts Batman by revealing that new supervillain Dr. Hurt has told him that Batman's present situation is a result of his attempting to understand the Joker's estranged state of mind;[14] later, in *Batman and Robin Must Die!*, the Joker acknowledges that without Batman "something just went out in my head."[15] This variation on their mutual dependence becomes increasingly intimate: they need one another to function, but the reader also needs both of them, adapting one constantly to the other and to other new threats in order to acquire Morrison's message about the superheroic mode.

Morrison's reader has to learn to read the superhero form the way the Joker reads his reality, by adapting themselves to it free-associatively as they read.

In *Batman Incorporated*, it is the future Batman, who may exist in a prismatic timeline outside of the new continuity which Morrison establishes, who realizes who is *really* behind Leviathan, knowledge which the contemporary Batman (Bruce Wayne) brings back from his own time travel. The future Damian Wayne is granted the revelatory knowledge that his mother Talia Al'Ghul (with the collaboration of Dr. Hurt) is behind the destruction of Gotham at the hands of a virally transmitted Joker Venom when he is in the last bastion of (relative) sanity: Arkham Asylum. The anthropomorphic gorilla, Jackanapes, whose costume is that of a clown and whose name recalls Tim Burton's Jack Napier (who becomes the Joker in his 1989 film), echoes the Joker we know, saying to Damian Wayne that he can hear Gotham "laughing itself to death at the Joker's final gag."[16] Once again, exposure to the Joker's mind, this time as a threatening atmospheric essence, allows Batman to "get it"; it gives him access to a higher level of insight into the forces directing the swirl of nonlinear events that characterize his existence. This timeline also establishes a link between the Joker's psyche and the process of becoming Batman in a more direct way, by connecting Damian Wayne's Batman with Terry McGinnis, the (even farther) future Batman of the *Batman Beyond* series. Damian rescues the baby of Warren and Mary McGinnis from 2-Face-2, who has dosed the infant with the same chemical he is using to transform the population of Gotham into "Jokerzombies," "weaponized Joker Venom in the form of neurotoxic rain."[17] By implication, Terry McGinnis's early exposure to Joker Venom is part of what makes him able to take on the mantle of Batman but, again, the precise connection between these events and timelines is left in doubt.

Joker-thought: Joker as Agent and Personification II

The *Complete History* of Batman terms the relationship between Batman and the Joker as the beginning of a "peculiarly American form of expressionism" where characters live "surrounded by countless emblems of their obsessions, treat[ing] crime as a series of publicity stunts."[18] Morrison has taken a particular slant on this expressionism; his Joker is a figure of apparent disorder who offers a critical perspective on the formative structures of the contemporary superhero mode.

Morrison's prismatic doubt and fungibility also foregrounds another structural feature of superhero narratives: their modal liminality. Superhero

narratives operate precisely on the borderland between fantasy and science fiction (SF): some superheroes adhere to an epistemology of scientific explanation, others to a metaphysical or supernatural one, and all operate within the fictional universes owned by a particular corporate identity. It is important to remember that it is the corporation, not the writers and artists, that take the author function; this, and its overdetermining role in situating the superhero epistemology from narrative to narrative, is crucial for understanding Morrison's position in respect to the Batman/Joker relationship. The Joker represents a kind of subjective, artistic free play of meaning, between magic and science, operating within and against the corporate, authorial control of superhero continuity.

The Joker's characterization is *visibly* inconsistent and commented upon within continuity precisely because it emulates it; his psychic instability has license to foreground the structure of the form. Within superhero continuity, each fresh storyline effectively charts its own position with respect to its category as fantasy or SF, with an uncertain relationship between them; there is no overarching epistemological "sense"—only a subjective sense determined according to how the writer addresses the immediate context as directed (to greater or lesser extents) by the author functions of editorial policy and corporate identity. This is directly analogous to the relationship Morrison's Joker has to his earlier and/or parallel interpretations. In "The Clown at Midnight," the Joker enters a meditative state where he evaluates his previous selves (not just "the Satire Years" and "New Homicidal," but also versions from more recent narratives, notably Jeph Loeb and Jim Lee's *Hush*) and self-consciously selects between them to generate a new "superpersona," thereby effectively editing himself for the new super-narratives in which he will play several distinctive parts.

The terms of Mark Bould's[19] contemporary Marxist theory of the fantastic can help to probe this dimension of the Joker's super-narrative self-reflexivity further. In his essay, "The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things," Bould proposes a reconceptualization of fantasy theory that would take into account the specific commodity status of fantasy texts and therefore read "fantasy" in general for its relationship with the global commodity form as well as with individual subjectivity within particular formulations. Bould writes that the imaginative exchange involved in fantasy is a direct analogue for material production within the commodity system whereby all labor "is composed of . . . a cybernetic process of imaginative construction and material construction" and that "the performance of such operations on material reality can be seen as a fundamentally paranoid act, a re-ordering of a pre-existing order so

as to make a sensible system of meaning within a traumatically and intransigently elusive Real." He adds that this reordering of existence "also applies in the manipulation of language and the production of text, where the limits of physical matter are replaced by the limitations of language, discourse, ideology and the commodity system."[20] From this basis, he argues that the forces by which the individual constructs her- or himself as a subject within the limits of a global culture, defined by the commodity form, are *homologous* with those which define fantasy fiction as a cultural form: an attempt to create a world which is consistent with itself and which can offer the subject a way to relate to the Real, but which is itself based on the reflexively imaginary. In the operations of the Joker's mind, we see a similar process of self-reflexive paranoia at work where the Joker literally fantasizes himself (his new self) into existence.

The Joker responds to the reality of postmodernity by aggressive play as a subject undergoing constant flux: "He keeps coming back . . . different. . . . I think he recreates himself constantly." In turn, Morrison's Batman is constantly learning to be Batman in response to his ultimate enemy, who is like the demand for the "new" in modernity: always different yet always the same.[21] This relationship is defined by synthesis and iteration. I have suggested in an online article on Morrison's Batman fictions that there is a particular relationship between Batman's ultimate enemy and the formal structure of the superhero mode: Batman's enemies, Dr. Simon Hurt (the Black Glove, El Penitente) and Dr. Dedalus (Otto Netz), embody repetitive violent spectacle as the recurring, overdetermined form of the superhero narrative itself. By extension, their relationship to the superhero mode parallels the global form of capital as a constant iteration of commodity relationships: supervillains resemble the commodity form insofar as they are always new and different but must all function in essentially the same way within an overarching structure. Superhero continuity thus formally echoes the commodity.[22]

Yet the Joker also points the way towards a possible exception to this logic, because he recreates himself to oppose Batman's ultimate enemy, Dr. Hurt, as a rival. The Joker is situated somewhere between supervillain and superhero in Morrison's fiction; his ambivalence is instructive for how we can reconceive populist fantasy narratives to critical ends. Morrison's Batman is so successful in defeating enemies greater than him *primarily* because he has learned from the Joker; Batman's idea for an "emergency personality," "a back up human operating system" to defend his mind against attack from Dr. Hurt, is based on the Joker's psyche.[23] There is a distinct possibility that Morrison's Joker creates sufficient space to, theoretically at least, rehabilitate his

own destructive tendencies within the overarching context of the superhero narrative form.

Counterculture Modernisms and "The Clown at Midnight": Joker as Essence and Personification

The necessity for the Joker to be present in relation to Batman is so strong that he is symbolically present, or present as essence, even in the narratives from which he is otherwise largely absent. Morrison's *Batman and Robin: Reborn*—collected in *Batman vs. Robin* and *Batman & Robin Must Die!*—are suffused with references to the Joker, and in particular to Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke* and other Batman narratives defined by their relationship with the Joker. The first villains Batman and Robin encounter in Morrison's series are a circus-themed gang, collected around Professor Pyg, whose hideout proves to be the same funfair that we see the Joker buying in *The Killing Joke*. Jason Todd, the Robin murdered by the Joker, returns as Red Hood (in common with the narrative *Under The Hood*);[24] he is wearing a helmet, however, recalling that worn by the failed stand-up comic whose fall into chemicals transforms him into the Joker in *The Killing Joke*. The English masked detective Oberon "The Gravedigger" Sexton reinforces this allusion by pointing out in his television interview that "the Red Hood is a name used by more than one notorious Gotham criminal in the past."[25]

Oberon "The Gravedigger" Sexton's backstory is that he is a detective from England whose "face was scarred by criminals who killed his wife,"[27] echoing the Joker's own backstory in Moore and Bolland's *The Killing Joke*. After the fashion of the English detective story, Sexton is an amateur detective and writer rather than being connected to official law enforcement. Sexton is then revealed to be the Joker, saying, "disguise is also one of my many accomplishments after all,"[26] a line lifted from a 1940s Joker monologue appearing in the story where the character originates. In the *Deluxe Edition* of *Batman & Robin Must Die!*, Morrison's notes explain that he initially conceived the character of "The Gravedigger" with the spelling "Auberon Sexton," after the English writer Auberon Waugh, but altered the spelling to "Oberon Sexton" to play on the fairy king in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.[28] These two names, and the change between them, offer two alternate intertextual connections to Morrison's other work in keeping with the prismatic aesthetic.

Morrison's occasional prose fictions all engage with a series of aesthetic debates on form. The first spelling, "Auberon Sexton," would resonate with

a character from Morrison's parodic prose story, "The Room Where Love Lives," featuring occult detective Aubrey Valentine. Sexton and Valentine already have structurally identical histories: Valentine suffered a disfigurement and the loss of his wife to occult forces known as The Mysteries, who leave him with a scar which enables him to fight them—a withered hand which he modifies into a Hand of Glory.[29] The second allusion draws a parallel with Morrison's female villain, the Queen of the Sheeda, or fairy folk, from *Seven Soldiers of Victory* and requires a little more unpacking.

Decadence and Ultimate Enemies: Joker as Essence and Personification II (The Tenebrous Return)

Although the Joker transforms as a subject, and according to Dr. Ruth Adams in Morrison's *Arkham Asylum*, "he *has* no real personality,"[30] he has a highly distinct identity, developed in response to the "barrage of input"[31] that constitutes contemporary modernity, he is nevertheless a *subject* where Batman's "ultimate" opponents are primarily personified functions.

Villains like Dr. Hurt/El Penitente and Dr. Dedalus/Otto Netz represent the superhero form as a negative pressure towards endless repetitive violence, and this is a characteristic shared with previous Morrison villains such as Gloriana Tenebrae in *Seven Soldiers of Victory*. I would like to suggest that Morrison has used the Joker in a concretely different way, which adds significance to the Joker's opposition to Dr. Hurt in *Batman and Robin Must Die!* and which helps further the positive potential of the Joker's subjectivity for reading the superhero mode.

In Seven Soldiers of Victory,[32] which acts as a prelude to *Final Crisis* but was conceived separately, the DC Universe is threatened by the invasion of Queen Morgayne, also called Gloriana Tenebrae. Drawing on a mixture of Arthurian writing and Celtic myth, Gloriana Tenebrae is the Queen of the "Sheeda" (also spelled as in the Irish original, "sidhe")—the Sheeda live a billion years in the future on a dying Earth. They survive this hostile environment by time travelling to prey on other, preceding, civilizations:

> Ideas, resources, fashions, technologies. We will slake our thirst on the juices of their accomplishments. . . . We will feast on the fruits of their industry! . . . In their death agonies the empires of the earth will revitalize our stale sciences, our dead arts.[33]

This is a critique of postmodernist appropriation: the Sheeda are the supreme decadent civilization, attracted to the decline and decadence of each

civilization of the Earth in turn to drain it not just of materials but even of its concepts and its history.

Gloriana Tenebrae's civilization moves through time, she recontextualizes herself ahistorically to the declines of other civilizations, physically and metaphysically appropriating elements from all other times and cultures to sustain the totalitarian perspective of her own culture in its state of decadence. As time travelers, the Sheeda also link together plot holes from other preexisting parts of Continuity. They represent a postmodernism that presents itself as an apolitical, totalitarian absolute, naturalized, and internalized into a cultural given: "The *last* living species clinging to life on a *dying* earth! Consuming their own *history* to survive. . . . They're not *fairies*, not *aliens*. *They're us*."[34] Gloriana Tenebrae is like Dr. Hurt; both are ahistorical and unchanging forces of homeostasis. The Joker, despite his iterative relationship with Batman, is constantly changing himself, constantly adapting to history.

Time has no meaning to these "ultimate" supervillains because they combine elements that have gone before to maintain a decadent homeostasis in which they can exist, an End of History which is itself ahistorical. Gloriana Tenebrae exists at the beginning and the end of human history on Earth through time travel, and she seeks to impose an ahistorical, cyclical pattern on the world. Similarly, Dr. Hurt exists at both the beginning and end of Batman's history thanks to the introduction of the time-travel narrative of *The Return of Bruce Wayne*. Dr. Hurt, as Darkseid's hyper-adapter, is cogent with Batman's entire history. Because of their relationship with time travel these characters stand for the function of superhero continuity: they represent the postmodernism of contemporary culture as a constantly repeating set of structures and, *through* the motifs, they are of history but are not themselves historical. Morrison views this kind of postmodernist narrativizing as a "decadent, recombinant phase" of culture, dominated by an eternal present which moves through time but does not change.[35]To Morrison, the superhero narrative has a strong tendency to promote and reinforce a form of cultural stasis which he finds essentially decadent and not progressive because it does not adapt. As if to emphasize this point, Morrison has the Joker reproduce the dying fall of Darkseid through history caused by Batman (*Final Crisis*) as a pratfall where Dr. Hurt slips on a well-placed banana skin; the Joker can learn the lesson of Marx's "Eighteenth Brumiere," but Dr. Hurt cannot.

Batman's "ultimate" enemy, whoever he or she happens to be, is primarily form over content; to counter this way of thinking, the reader must learn from the Joker and think historically about subjectivity. The ultimate enemy of Batman is inevitably a dark twin of Batman, a reflection and a double of an already split persona, reproducing existing relationships. But the Joker

is not a twin—he is Batman's contemporary. In Morrison's conception, this difference makes him much closer to being Batman's equal, someone capable of combining the endless iterations of binary opposition to produce a synthesis, and he is very much a representative of the shifting contemporary moment.

Clowning Midnight: The Joker as Personification and Agent III

When we are given access to the Joker's mind in "The Clown at Midnight," Morrison gives us a range of apocalyptic imagery, signaling his rebirth in similarly dense, allusive, decadent, and stylized prose: "Breathing slowly in his bright and boundless Hell, the Clown Prince of Cruelty dreams a new face, a new world, a Year Zero."[36] "His new personality eats him alive from the inside out and he is gone, absolved of all blame for what he will do, now and forever more."[37] Morrison continues: "He feels like a god again—the Thin White Duke of Death with his graveyard grin and his eternal promise of humiliation and pain[,] Jack of All Crimes, the Knave of Razors."[38]

Morrison's imagery here recalls the cultural milieu of British decadent SF-horror fictions of the 1990s such as those found in the Creation Books anthology *The Starry Wisdom* (1994),[39] which Morrison contributed to, and David Conway's *Metal Sushi* (both edited by D. M. Mitchell),[40] for which Morrison wrote the introduction. In the introduction for *Metal Sushi*, Morrison describes Conway's style as an aspirational form, struggling with its own determining limits. Comparing it with Clive Barker's breakthrough into horror publishing, he terms it "superheated, superdense prose," combining Lovecraft and manga, and, in a nod to the popularity of the Chemical Generation fiction, adds that it "seemed made to be snorted rather than read." He concludes that Conway's excessive style "seemed [to] defy genre and aspire instead towards the visionary ecstasies of Coleridge."[41] These countercultural fictions follow the sexualized apocalyptic tradition in British Horror charted by John Nicholson's essay, "On Sex and Horror from the 1970s to the '90s";[42] they have a distinctly millennial tone and place a heavy emphasis on the meeting of Surrealism and the Gothic, two aesthetic and conceptual poles which clearly re-emerge in the characterization of Morrison's Joker. This tendency is clearly present in each of the short fictions and stage plays collected in Morrison's own anthology for the same publisher, *Lovely Biscuits*: "The Braille Encyclopedia" plays on George Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, punning on different forms of sight; "Lovecraft In Heaven" is a fever dream of Lovecraft's mind on the point of death undergoing self-analysis and finally finding humor in his

cosmic horror; and "I'm a Policeman" is a millennial anti-authoritarian party story. The style of prose in "The Clown at Midnight" is similarly dense and allusive, containing motifs that recall other counterculture fictions.[43]

The razor-wielding persona adopted by the Joker recalls infamous underground fantasy character Lord Horror, created by David Britton and illustrated by Kris Guidio and John Coulthart. The reference to the Joker's own Year Zero, a phrase Morrison uses to allude to the darker, destructive aspect of historical revolutions, also reminds us that Britton's Lord Horror comics are discussed alongside Alan Moore's *From Hell*, under the title "Y is for Year Zero," in *Clive Barker's A-Z of Horror*. Created as a vicious satire on British politics in the 1980s and '90s, *Lord Horror* is an alternate universe fiction based on World War II traitor "Lord Haw-Haw," the British Nazi. Britton's Lord Horror is a thin, fascistic psychopath wielding twin razors who in the comic book series *Reverbstorm* wears harlequin motley.[44] Harley Quinn's reference to Picasso in "The Clown at Midnight" may also reinforce the allusion to John Coulthart's memorably disturbing artwork in *Reverbstorm*, since the graphic narrative uses interpolated details from Picasso's *Guernica* as a visual motif to counterpoint Lord Horror's fascist politics with the famous anti-fascist imagery. Coulthart, who provided cover illustrations for both Conway's *Metal Sushi* and Morrison's *Lovely Biscuits*, was also scheduled to produce illustrations for Morrison's novella "Luvkraft vs Kutulu"; Morrison refers to him in an interview as John "Pickman" Coulthart. The new persona of Morrison's Joker—the Thin White Duke of Death, "Jack of All Crimes, the Knave of Razors"[45]—clearly resonates with Britton's Lord Horror, but also recalls Morrison's own stage play *Red King Rising* (1988), which posited a relationship between Jack the Ripper and Lewis Carroll, published in *Lovely Biscuits*.[46]

Despite this emphasis on chaos and horror in characterizing the Joker, there is still humor here in Morrison's portrayal, and, more importantly, there is reflexivity and progression. The Joker meditates on the previous versions of himself that the reader knows from earlier interpretations: "the Satire Years before Camp, and New Homicidal," tracking the movement from Golden Age to TV series and the 1980s "Dark Age."[47] Where the imagery is grotesque, Morrison retains a clear streak of subversion:

> Maybe he is the model for 21st-century big-time multiplex man, shuffling selves like a croupier deals cards, to buffer the shocks and work some alchemy that might just turn the lead of tragedy and horror into the fierce, chaotic gold of the laughter of the damned. Maybe he is special, and not just a gruesomely scarred, mentally-ill man addicted to an endless cycle of self-annihilating violence. Stranger things have happened.[48]

Here, the Joker's development of his own personae is an explicitly synthetic act, using the conceptual framework of alchemy and undercutting himself with a moment of bathetic reflexivity. It appears as a self-parody of Morrison's earlier countercultural texts and shows the Joker deliberately surveying his earlier Selves and previous superpersonas from an almost metafictional position.

Because of his heightened access to perspectives outside of the norm and his capacity to respond to his environment in a nonlinear manner, the Joker is the vital component of Morrison's model of readerly subjectivity for the superhero comic book: able to change interpretation between fantastical and realistic and able to accept simultaneous contraries (this is literally happening; this is only a representation of what is actually happening; this is only a potential version of future/past events). In *Batman R.I.P.*, through the repetition of Art and Artist motifs, the Joker is repeatedly cast as collaborating artist to Batman-as-writer,[49] while in *Batman & Robin Must Die!*, in the absence of the *real* Batman, the Joker takes on both roles by becoming Oberon Sexton.

In the development from *Batman R.I.P.* to *Batman & Robin Must Die!*, Morrison's Joker comes to stand for the *constant negotiation between metanarratives*; in that sense, he represents important aspects of Morrison's own attitude towards the production of superhero narratives—and by extension to contemporary society—that such active negotiation is the necessary defining response to postmodernity in order to progress. Morrison's Joker teaches progress, and each Batman in turn encounters the Joker as essence, as an agent of change, or as a personification of disruption or transformation, in order to learn how to adapt to their own place in modernity.

Conclusion: Joker as Initiation, Batman as Eternal Initiate

Morrison's Batman undergoes several trials by ordeal in *Batman: The Black Glove* and *Batman R.I.P.*, from the Thogal ritual to wandering the streets of Gotham, each of which recapitulates or returns Morrison's reader to earlier narratives about the process of Bruce Wayne becoming Batman. In *Batman and Son*, Morrison's reintroduction of the Joker is an extended recapitulation of his characterization of the Joker in *Arkham Asylum*, which he then extends as a guiding principle to unite the Joker's physical presence with the thematic presences of Joker Venom and Joker Virus; these, because they both confer the Joker's personality on their victims, both effectively function as

reiterations of the basic trial—Batman versus the Joker. This underlying trial has a consistent character in its different plots; it is a confrontation which produces insight—meeting the Joker is Batman's process of initiation. The motif of initiation appears in *Arkham Asylum*, where Batman first encounters the Joker as he enters a magic circle drawn around the asylum, and I would like to conclude by commenting on the implicit recurring instances of the Joker as a *living initiation* for each person who will become Batman.

The concept of initiation rites as events that combine the iteration and synthesis of symbolic motifs is of particular importance to Morrison's idiosyncratic work on *The Invisibles*. It is particularly central to the plot arc that reveals the origins of the transvestite sorcerer, Lord Fanny. In a story called "She-Man," which reveals Morrison's interest in the fluidity of identity over time, as well as through gender roles and performance, we see Lord Fanny in London, age twenty-three, hallucinating hir (his/her) coming-of-age experience, age eleven, on the "Day of Nine Dogs" in Mexico.[50] During the initiation, Lord Fanny's butterfly spirit guardian says "a true initiation never ends . . . the moment of your initiation is a ripple in the bubble of time."[51]

Age eleven, the Lord Fanny, experiencing the rite as hir first initiation, is granted leave from Mictlan, "the Dead Land,"[52] because s/he tells Mictlantehcutli a joke about cot death, recalling the Joker of *Arkham Asylum* who tells Batman a similarly bad taste joke. Morrison originally planned for the Joker in *Arkham Asylum* to be a transvestite to draw attention to the fluidity of identity that is a theme of the story. Morrison's marginal notes in the "Final Draft" of the original script, published in the fifteenth anniversary edition of *Arkham Asylum*, indicate that he had made this still more explicit, having Joker dressed as Madonna "from [her] 'Open Your Heart' video," wearing a "black basque, seamed tights and lace up stiletto boots" with "an anarchy 'A' badge."[53] In the final version illustrated by Dave McKean, the Joker retains only the high heels and false nails, but his knowledge of Dr. Cavendish's ritualistic intent—which involves wearing a wedding dress that belonged to Amadeus Arkham's mother—and the initiatory quality of that narrative suggest a more substantive resonance between Morrison's recapitulation of the Joker of *Arkham Asylum* in his "Clown at Midnight" story and Lord Fanny's return to the Day of Nine Dogs in *Apocalypstick*: Morrison's Joker is knowingly playing with the ritual.

The later incarnation of the Joker in "The Clown at Midnight" is expressed in a dense bombardment of imagery that recalls the free-associative speech of Lord Fanny's hallucinatory episode through the shared emphasis on landscapes and decay. Lord Fanny in Mictlan sees "the ghosts of mountains long

ago ground down" under the "vast iron sun of the underworld,"[54] while the Joker's interior landscape invokes "ground zero in Hiroshima" and he "dreams of his throne beneath a handicapped sun."[55] This effect is dispersed across the perceptions of Harley Quinn who imagines the Joker's thoughts "as unknown cities on a distant planet" that she wishes to explore.[56] The physical description of the Joker as "Thin White Duke of Death" functions as an allusion to the androgynous public image of early David Bowie, reinforcing the connection to Lord Fanny, but his appearance in a pale, sweeping hospital gown also recalls the skeletal Mictlantehcutli, "the bone king in his paper shroud and pointed hat."[57] Mictlantehcutli's physique parallels "The Joker from Hell"[58] as a "bony ghoul" or "diseased demon jester from a negative world beyond all human laws," suggesting an unchanging essence, but in this context appearing as an expression of the Joker's personal transformative capacity.[59] Similarly, although the monstrous beings of the Dead Land in *The Invisibles: Apocalypstick* are essentially ahistorical, or outside time, for Lord Fanny, the rite of passage is a *transhistorical moment*, an event which must be continually remediated through each new experience. In return for hir joke, on leaving the Dead Land s/he is told that "we gods are only masks," a concept which *The Invisibles* returns to repeatedly in exploring the conception of gods and archetypes as personae, something that is particularly suggestive for Morrison's subsequent superhero work.[60] In his recent Batman series, Morrison casts the Joker as both landscape and persona: a sky full of Joker Venom in the form of rain, a Gotham City of Joker Virus infectees, or the rival detective Oberon Sexton, who manipulates Damian Wayne into a locked room.

As Morrison's subsequent Batman narratives—such as *Time and the Batman*—indicate, whether embodied in present Batmen Bruce Wayne or Dick Grayson, or future Batmen Damian Wayne or Terry McGuiness, Batman only learns how to be Batman when he can negotiate a relationship with the Joker. Only as a result of initiation by the Joker can he formulate an escape from the cyclical traps of his enemies and only through reading Batman's relationship with the Joker can Morrison's reader begin to see how their essential dyad can be transformative.

Notes

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2. Marc Singer, *Grant Morrison: Combining the Worlds of Contemporary Comics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 252–54.
3. Grant Morrison, Igor Kordey, and Cameron Stewart, "Batman and Robin Must Die!: Part One: The Garden of Death," *Batman & Robin* #13, August 2010 (New York: DC Comics).

4. Grant Morrison, Tony S. Daniel, Andy Kubert, and Frank Quitely, *Batman* #700, August 2010; Grant Morrison and Chris Burnham, *Batman Incorporated* #5, January 2013, n.p.

5. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984; 1979), 144.

6. Steve Beard, "Archaic Modernity #1," *Logic Bomb: Transmissions from the Edge of Style Culture* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), 186.

7. Mark P. Williams, "Superhero Narratives and Social Values: The Role of Globalisation and the Avant-Garde in Grant Morrison's *Batman*," *Werewolf 23*, http://werewolf.co.nz/2011/05/superhero-narratives-and-social-values/.

8. Grant Morrison and Igor Kordey, *Batman R.I.P.* (New York: DC Comics, 2008–2009).

9. Grant Morrison and Frazer Irving, *Batman and Robin* #15, October 2010, n.p.

10. Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: re:press, 2008), 43–53.

11. R. Negarestani, "Machines Are Digging: Lovecraft and the Poromechanics of Horror," in *Songs of the Black Wurm Gism: Hymns to H. P. Lovecraft, Starry Wisdom 2*, edited by D. M. Mitchell (London: Creation Oneiros, 2009), 167–85; Grant Morrison, "Luvkraft vs Kutulu," in *Songs of the Black Wurm Gism* (Creation Oneiros, 2009), 13–22.

12. Morrison and Kordey, *Batman R.I.P.*, n.p.

13. Grant Morrison, "Introduction," in *Batman: The Black Casebook*, by Bill Finger, Edmond Hamilton, et al. (New York: DC Comics, 2009), n.p.

14. Morrison and Kordey, *Batman R.I.P*, n.p.

15. Morrison, Kordery, and Stewart, *Batman & Robin* #13, August 2010, n.p.

16. Morrison and Burnham, *Batman Incorporated* #5, January 2013, n.p.

17. Morrison, Daniel, Finch, Kubert, and Quitely, *Batman* #700, August 2010, n.p.

18. Les Daniels, *Batman: The Complete History* (New York: DC Comics, 1999), 41.

19. Mark Bould, "The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things: A Tendency in Fantasy Theory," *Historical Materialism* 10, no. 4 (2002): 51–88.

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21. Grant Morrison and Igor Kordey, "The Butler Did It," *Batman #682* (New York: DC Comics, 2009), 20.

22. Williams, "Superhero Narratives and Social Values."

23. Morrison and Kordey, *Batman R.I.P.*, 134.

24. Judd Winick and Doug Mahnke, *Under The Hood* (New York: DC Comics, 2005).

25. Grant Morrison, Philip Tan, and Jonathan Glapion, *Batman and Robin* #4, November 2009, n.p.

26. Grant Morrison, Igor Kordey, and Cameron Stewart, *Batman & Robin* #5 (New York: DC Comics, 2009), n.p.

27. Morrison, Kordery, and Stewart, *Batman & Robin* #4, n. p.

28. Grant Morrison, *Batman and Robin Must Die! Deluxe Edition*, 149–68.

29. Grant Morrison, "The Room Where Love Lives," in *Lovely Biscuits* (Swansea: Oneiros, 1998), 19–38.

30. Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth 15th Anniversary Edition*. (New York: DC Comics, 2004; 1989), 30.

31. Ibid., 29.

32. Grant Morrison and Igor Kordey, *Seven Soldiers of Victory, Volumes 1–4*. (New York: DC Comics, 2004–2007). I refer to the novels between 2005–2006.

33. Ibid., vol. 4.

34. Ibid., 198–99; emphasis in original.

35. Grant Morrison and Igor Kordey, *New X-Men: New Worlds* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2002); Williams, "Superhero Narratives and Social Values." For more on my analysis on the correlation of late-1990s SF-fantasy to decadence and the avant-garde, see also Mark P. Williams, "The

Superheated, Superdense Prose of David Conway: Gender and Subjectivity Beyond *The Starry Wisdom*," in *Gothic Science Fiction*, edited by Sara Patricia Wasson and Emily Alder. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).

36. Morrison and Kordey, *Batman and Son*, 117.
37. Ibid., 121.
38. Ibid., 122.
39. D M. Mitchell, ed. *The Starry Wisdom: A Tribute To H. P. Lovecraft* (London: Creation, 1994)
40. David Conway, *Metal Sushi* (Swansea: Oneiros 1998).
41. Grant Morrison, "Introduction," *Metal Sushi*, by David Conway (Swansea: Oneiros, 1998).
42. John Nicholson, "On Sex and Horror," in *Gothic Horror*, edited by Clive Bloom (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).
43. Grant Morrison, "The Braille Encyclopedia," 1–18; "Lovecraft in Heaven," 79–91; "Im A Policeman," 173–85, in*Lovely Biscuits* (Swansea: Oneiros, 1998).
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46. Morrison, "Red King Rising,'" in *Lovely Biscuits* (Swansea: Oneiros, 1998; 1989), 39–78.
47. Morrison and Kordey, *Batman and Son*, 121.
48. Grant Morrison, Igor Kordey, and Cameron Stewart, "The Clown at Midnight," *Batman* #663 (New York: DC Comics, 2007) 121.
49. Williams, "Superhero Narratives and Social Values."
50. Grant Morrison, Jill Thompson, Chris Weston, John Ridgway, Steve Parkhouse, and Paul Johnson, *The Invisibles: Apocalypstick* (New York: DC/Vertigo, 2001), 128.
51. Ibid., 133.
52. Ibid., 160.
53. Grant Morrison, "Batman Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth: Full Script and Notes," in *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth 15th Anniversary Edition* (2004), 12n.
54. Morrison, et al., *The Invisibles: Apocalypstick*, 145.
55. Morrison, "The Clown At Midnight," "Chapter 9—Harlequin of Hell," in *Batman and Son*, n.p.
56. Ibid., "Chapter 7—The Checkerboard Doll," n.p.
57. Morrison, et al., *The Invisibles: Apocalypstick*, 121.
58. Morrison, "The Clown At Midnight," "Chapter 8—Joker Unbound," in *Batman and Son*, n.p.
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"YOU COMPLETE ME"

The Joker as Symptom

MiChael goodru M

That Batman and the Joker are connected has become something of a truism. In fact, explicit acknowledgment of a bond transcending the usual superhero/supervillain relationship appears relatively frequently in Batman narratives—for instance, in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), where the Joker wakes from a coma as Batman returns to crime-fighting, or Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum* (1989), where the Joker suggests that Batman belongs in the asylum with those he has captured. Terrence Wandtke has stated that "the existence of superheroes results in the existence of supervillains" but this does not necessarily tell the whole story.[1] Batman and the Joker may be locked into a relationship of mutual construction, but they also draw on and contribute to more general social processes; their relationship does not exist in a vacuum. Batman and the Joker are part of society and as such exist in dialogue with it. A great deal could be said about the relationship between the Joker and Batman across all of the media in which they have appeared, but this piece will take as its focus Christopher Nolan's film *The Dark Knight*.[2]

In order to truly understand the nature of the connection between Batman, the Joker, and society, it is essential to move beyond such categories as "good" and "evil," "hero" and "villain." Both the Joker and Batman conceal their identities, use excessive violence, and—at least in *The Dark Knight*—engage in a war against organized crime; the Joker seems to suggest a preference for (*dis)organized* crime, that is, crime that appears random, and that he describes as such, but is actually remarkably well thought-out. From these descriptions, it is difficult to see which, if either, is heroic. Instead of clearly identifiable forces of good and evil, then, it is more profitable to consider these individuals as *symptoms*. Slavoj Zizek has defined symptoms as

> all phenomena which appear to everyday bourgeois consciousness as simple deviations, contingent deformations or degenerations of the "normal" functioning of society . . . and [are] as such abolishable through amelioration of the system, [but which are in fact] necessary products of the system itself—the points at which the "truth," the immanent antagonistic character of the system, erupts.[3]

Both Batman and the Joker are parts of the system; it is in this sense that they "complete" one another, as the Joker remarks. Batman could be seen to represent the forces that hold society together, the Joker those that constantly threaten its fragmentation. As long as society exists, at least in its current Western form, these opposing forces will constantly be in motion and will find a mode of expression. The myth of a stable society is precisely that: a myth.

Just as a stable society is apparently unobtainable, Zizek suggests ways in which individual identity is also unstable, not a thing-in-itself but something that exists in relation to wider processes. Zizek's remark that "only by being reflected in another man—that is, in so far as this other man offers it an image of its unity—can the ego arrive at its self-identity" provides an insight into dialogic processes of identity construction eminently applicable to Batman and the Joker.[4] Neither Batman nor the Joker is a "whole" individual. All Batman offers the Joker is a mask that conceals and obscures; in return, the Joker creates a mask of his own with greasepaint and scars (in the comic book Joker crossover narrative *Death of the Family*, the Joker takes this to extremes: the Joker cuts off his own face and then wears it as a mask). Both masks reveal as well as conceal, providing insights into elements of both characters while preventing an observer from getting a fix on the whole. Batman and the Joker also both wear costumes, but the Joker's theatricality of both dress and manner suggests that he, unlike Batman, will admit to merely playing a part. Whereas the Joker clearly states that he exists in dialogue with his adversary, Batman lays claim to a self-contained identity, and therefore "the property of 'being-an-equivalent' appears to belong to [Batman] outside [his] relationship to [the Joker]," that is, Batman already appears to be an equivalent of the Joker outside of his relationship to the Joker.[5] Batman therefore perceives his identity, not only maintained by dialogue but constructed through it from the foundations up, as a fixed point around which everything else must revolve. The Joker, seemingly aware of the shortcomings of Batman's position, sets out to expose multiple claims to the contested domain that Batman has declared to be his own—a self-contained identity able to operate as the center of the narrative. Neither society nor Batman narratives can ever exist as a rational totality while Batman remains; his presence within

both destabilizes them, setting in motion forces beyond Batman's control. Batman's presence makes villains mandatory, and his existence as an extralegal force, a totalitarian blemish, renders the democracy he defends impossible. Even when Batman has defeated his current villain, the very presence of Batman suggests that victory is only temporary, that any victory is dark. Despite appearing as a force holding society together, Batman is also a symptom of antagonistic forces.

Themes of stability and instability are prominent in *The Dark Knight*, and the film explores these notions in three different ways. First, both society and leading figures of the establishment are exposed to increasing pressure by the Joker in an attempt to precipitate a fragmentation of Gotham; Harvey Dent, Gotham's district attorney, is the best example of this. Second, through increasing contact with the Joker, Batman increasingly comes to resemble him, at least in terms of actions. Finally, the way in which the character of the Joker is performed, in both the Butlerian sense and in terms of the qualities of Ledger's acting, begins to disrupt conventional relationships between audience and hero; Ledger's Oscar-winning performance was routinely identified as the center around which the rest of the film revolved, comfortably overshadowing Christian Bale's Batman and calling into question who really stars in the film (that is, the character most on display, the character who invites the most interest).[6] Regarding the other aspect of performance, Judith Butler defines performativity as "ritualized repetition by which norms produce and stabilize," a process to which the Joker only submits himself obliquely.[7] Whereas Batman is produced and fixed by his origin story, the Joker refuses to be forced into only one position through his creation of numerous origin stories—though there is a recurring traumatic kernel to each of the Joker's retellings that suggests a certain degree of continuity. In acknowledging ritualized repetition, the Joker does, however, to some extent produce and stabilize his own identity—as the Joker, as someone who views the "obscene rituals of the reigning ideology" as farce rather than force.[8] In refusing to submit to them himself, the Joker exposes norms as constructed and therefore open to processes of deconstruction. In some ways, then, the Joker constantly constructs himself as a force of deconstruction, both engaging with and undermining the systems that exist to perpetuate themselves and a specific set of power relations. Both Batman and the Joker have a role to play, but only the Joker routinely "performs," acknowledging himself and his actions as display intended to attract interest.

Instability is not a new idea in Batman texts—those including the Joker have featured such themes prominently for decades—but while the characters ultimately fulfill the roles of hero and villain in *The Dark Knight*, clear

divisions between them come under sustained assault, leaving audiences, as Jim Collins remarks, questioning precisely how far each character will go to achieve their ends.[9] Collins reinforces this by drawing a contrast with Umberto Eco's analysis of James Bond as a generic text, enjoyment of which depends upon its predictability. Batman, in contrast, is a hero who seems to be becoming increasingly unpredictable, at least in narratives such as *The Dark Knight*.[10]

From the very beginning, *The Dark Knight* engages with the difficulties involved in the existence of a figure such as Batman and his impact on Gotham society. The film begins with a host of Batman imitators trying to capture a mob boss and Scarecrow, one of the villains from *Batman Begins* (2005). It is not necessarily the mob that attracts attention here since, after all, crime is to be expected; what is of chief interest is the decision of ordinary civilians to dress up as Batman and to step outside the law themselves in an act that both rejects and reconstructs society. In becoming vigilantes, these Batman imitators suggest that the mechanisms for maintaining order in society are insufficient. By taking it on themselves to maintain order, they are working towards a fantasy of how society ought to be—a fantasy that does not include men dressing up as Batman. The Joker encapsulates this dilemma perfectly when, having captured a Batman impersonator, he states that "this is how crazy Batman's made Gotham," positioning Batman as the cause and everything else, including the Joker, as an effect. As the Joker is a more skillful manipulator of the media than Batman, he ensures that his interpretation is circulated widely, undermining Batman's ongoing project of order and forcing the hero into a corner from which, given the Joker's construction of the terms of debate, Batman has little chance of escape.

Batman, however, attempts to assert himself as a force of stability. Before the Joker's ultimatum, Batman's capture of Lau (the accountant to organized crime) makes possible the arrest and initial indictment of 549 criminals at once. With so many of Gotham's criminals out of circulation, the mechanisms of maintaining order are noticeably strengthened. In order to redress the balance, the Joker organizes the deaths of the judge who presided over the hearing and the police commissioner responsible for organizing the arrests before setting out to tackle his major opposition in this field—District Attorney Harvey Dent. As the commissioner and judge are minor characters, they are disposed of rather quickly. The only purpose in their death is to undermine the system, and dying is sufficient to demonstrate this. Dent, on the other hand, has been built up into a figure of ideological investment, positioned as the man—the only man—capable of saving Gotham and restoring order.

Bruce Wayne himself repeats Dent's campaign slogan, "I believe in Harvey Dent," and states that this is the man who can create a Gotham where Batman is no longer necessary. Simply killing Dent is therefore not enough; the Joker has to destroy the belief invested in him and discredit the system through which, and for which, that belief is solicited. If the Joker were to achieve this aim, it seems unlikely that the fabric of Gotham could recover from such a tear.

In order to discredit Dent, the Joker executes an ingenious plan. Through corrupt members of the police, the Joker organizes the kidnapping of both Dent and his fiancée, forcing Batman to choose between saving Dent or Rachel. Batman chooses Rachel, leaving the police to retrieve Dent; Batman arrives before the explosion but discovers that the Joker has sent him to Dent's location and, although he manages to drag Dent clear before the explosion, Dent is badly burned on one side of his face. The police are too late to save Rachel and she is killed. Dent had been forced to endure the agony of talking to his fiancée through an open phone line, fully aware that she was going to die. While Dent is recovering in a hospital, Coleman Reese, an accountant from Wayne Enterprises, appears on a television chat show. After investigating the finances at Wayne Enterprises, he has worked out that Bruce Wayne must be Batman and is threatening to reveal that information. The Joker, who ultimately wants Batman to himself, calls the show and declares that if Reese is not dead within one hour, the Joker will blow up a hospital. In the face of such barbarism, society is once again divided. Authorities begin evacuating the hospitals but lynch mobs also spring up, ready to kill Reese to save the lives of hundreds of others.

Through these actions, the Joker is testing the strength of ideological belief in existing elites and the values they enshrine—attempting, in short, to atomize society. When Reese is not killed, the Joker fulfills his promise and destroys Gotham General. Before the Joker detonates the explosives, however, he sets out to undermine ideological belief in structures of order by warping the mind of Harvey Dent. There are several points to consider here; first, the fact that Dent is seen as the best chance for creating and maintaining a Gotham free of not only the Joker but also of Batman. The threat posed by the former is plain—threatening to blow up hospitals, killing prominent members of the elite—but Batman carries a similar threat. While there is a hero of this nature, stability is impossible; both Batman and the Joker are symptoms of the antagonism inherent in society, not deviations from the norm but an integral part of it. Andrew Ross, describing the relationship between Batman and the Joker, remarks that, "hoodlum and vigilante—one

helped to create the other, and vice versa; now each helps to define the other," and, by extension, the society in which they live.[11] Whether Dent could ever create a society free from the antagonisms that led to the creation of such characters as Batman and the Joker is unlikely, perhaps even impossible.

The instability of Gotham society over an extended period of time unleashes certain forces. Petty crime led to the creation of Batman, a force designed to hold Gotham together, but the continuing escalation of crime almost led to the destruction of the city at the hands of the League of Shadows in *Batman Begins* (2005). In *The Dark Knight*, similar processes result in similar outcomes: the desire for order on the part of Batman and Dent leads to the emergence of the Joker and the near-destruction of the city. This is not to imply that the Joker is an identity inhabited by someone directly foiled by the Batman and Dent as a means of taking revenge or, like Dr. Wolper from *The Dark Knight Returns*, that the Joker is somehow the "victim" of Batman's fascist approach to law enforcement—rather, that the processes put in place by Batman and Dent inevitably produce a response because Batman, too, is a symptom, "a particular element which subverts its own universal foundations"—an extra-legal force for order that undermines order, a totalitarian claim to democracy.[12]

The Joker's assault on order is more sophisticated than that of the League of Shadows. The League's plan was just to destroy buildings, to kill people. This, however, has the tendency to foster a sense of solidarity in those attacked, a powerful sense of unity that undermines the project of destabilization. In contrast, the Joker takes a two-pronged approach, staying true to the supervillain norm of property destruction and the deaths of civilians while also seeking to undermine ongoing projects of ideological investment. The Joker's greatest achievement is that he reveals the forces of instability at work even within Gotham's "white knight," Harvey Dent.

In the confusion created by his threat to blow up a hospital, the Joker manages to get Harvey Dent alone. In the hospital after the explosion, Dent is strapped to a bed and unable to move. As such, Dent can do little except listen to the Joker as he outlines how he had nothing to do with Rachel's death; instead, the Joker lays the blame on corrupt police officers and provides Dent with the details of those he deems responsible for the death. In his fragile mental state, Dent is convinced that the Joker is right and sets out for revenge. Disorder is therefore presented in two different ways. First, the Joker reveals the extent of corruption in the forces of order governing Gotham, making them unfit for continued ideological investment and creating an opportunity for instability to take hold. Second, and most crucially, Dent

is reduced to the status of a common criminal as he sets out to kill those he sees as responsible for Rachel's death, taking revenge outside the confines of the law he is supposed to represent. Instability now defines Dent—the two-headed coin he had previously used to "decide" whether or not to do something is now, like Dent himself, badly scarred on one side. Since Dent continues to use this coin to decide his course of action, his fate is now governed by chance. This indicates how instability lies at the very heart of stability: it is the same coin that before the accident, like Dent, stood for absolute certainty. In his departure from immutable principles, Dent, like the Joker, has become an "agent of chaos." Thus, Dent invalidates the ideological belief invested in him and threatens to destroy the fabric of belief that binds society together; at least, he would if Batman allowed knowledge of Dent's fall to be disseminated.

In order to prevent news of Dent's actions becoming common knowledge, Batman is forced to eliminate Dent and to take responsibility for his crimes; in other words, to absolve Dent of the murders he has committed and to prevent him from committing more, Batman has to murder Dent. Such a course of action runs contrary to Batman's code of conduct and so, in destroying Dent, the Joker has also discredited Batman and reinstated the pre-Dent relations of antagonism that led to the initial creation of the Joker. This, then, is a master stroke of villainy and one against which Batman has no defense.

Also contributing to the idea of the Joker as a consummate manipulator is the way he uses the media. The death of Dent shows how the Joker has been able to influence Batman in two different ways. First, the Joker creates a situation in which Batman is forced to break his one rule—not to kill—and as such to undermine his position as a hero. Second, the Joker's influence can be detected in Batman's subsequent attitude to the media: rather than giving them the truth (Dent is a killer), Batman provides them with the story they need to hear in order for him to achieve his ends. Despite being the hero, Batman has no visible media presence because occupying a prominent position would draw attention to the fact that Gotham needs a lone vigilante to maintain order; a realization of this nature would diminish ideological belief in the conventional mechanisms of government, undermining Batman's long-term project of stability and as such, unlike the Joker, he only has vicarious access to the media. Although Batman ultimately "wins" his battle with the Joker, it has come at a terrible cost. Dent and Rachel are dead, and Batman's reputation is in ruins. The impact of these events on Gotham is left unsaid, but it is clear that Batman has not enjoyed a straightforward victory—that, in fact, the Joker may have won almost as many rounds as his adversary.

Batman's relationship to the law is also laid bare by the Joker. In order to catch the Joker, Batman develops massively invasive technology that allows him to produce a sonar-style map of the entire city using mobile phones. In this, Batman engages with a statement by Zizek that "the Law is not to be accepted as true, only as necessary," a crucial distinction that raises points of analysis for both Batman and the Joker.[13] In removing the idea of truth, a universal ideal, and replacing it with necessity, Batman becomes able to operate outside the law in order to uphold it without contradicting his relationship to it. Conversely, the Joker refuses to accept either proposition (truth or necessity) and tries to shake the residents of Gotham out of their "ideological numbness" through acts of extreme violence; when the Joker states that the residents of Gotham either leave or "play by my rules," he is acknowledging the existence of arbitrary sets of rules and is attempting to demonstrate that, far from being natural, they can quite easily be supplanted by another set.[14] The technology Batman mobilizes in order to catch the Joker can also be seen as a critique of the Patriot Act, legislation widely interpreted as an assault on civil rights whose supporters sought to justify it on the grounds of necessity; universal ideals, such as freedom, are represented as secondary. Instead of guaranteeing ideals, the law protects particular sets of power relations, relations systematically exposed and assaulted by the Joker.

The death of Harvey Dent also demonstrates the Joker's ability to disrupt norms. The Joker has no rules, Batman has one—do not kill. Aware of this, the Joker asserts that he will force Batman to break his one rule and, at the time, it is implied that this will happen when Batman kills the Joker. However, Batman refuses the opportunity to kill the Joker on more than one occasion. When Batman kills Dent, he is doing so in order to prevent Dent from shooting Commissioner Gordon's son and it therefore appears to be the only option. Familiarity with Batman narratives, though, suggests a plethora of alternatives—the swift deployment of a bat-shaped *shuriken*, for instance, to disarm the attacker. This would be the predictable response, the one that echoes other moral heroes such as the Lone Ranger and his unerring ability to shoot guns from outlaws' hands without wounding the man. In killing Dent, Batman demonstrates his unpredictability and, in distancing Batman from the moral code and stability that establishes his heroic credentials, the Joker enjoys a clear victory.

An area where the Joker is less successful is in the confrontation on and between the ferries in Gotham Harbor. This episode has been summarized extensively elsewhere in this volume; the crux is, of course, that unless one destroys the other within an hour, the Joker will destroy both of them. What

follows is a stan doff between two parts of the system, the margins and the center. Through his actions in Gotham Harbor, the Joker is trying to expose society as a construction by forcing those inhabiting it into an act of barbarism—an act so uncivilized that they not only lose their stake in society but shatter the faith of others in society's ability to govern and perpetuate itself. The Gotham elite does little to solicit ideological belief at this crucial point of the narrative. The Joker has already destroyed a hospital yet he remains free; instead of hunting down the Joker, refusing to buy into the terms he offers when he orders Gotham to be cleared, the authorities set about emptying the prisons and clearing the city, effectively acknowledging that the Joker has the better cards. It is only once the ferry ultimatum has been issued that the authorities look to act, and even at this point, they are being guided by Batman. Despite these limitations, ideological belief proves unshakeable on board the ferries and both parties prove unable, or unwilling, to detonate the explosives on the other ship. In fact, the prisoners completely reject the situation, throwing the detonator out of the window. Even those marginalized by the system prefer its values to chaos.

It therefore falls to the Joker to detonate both boats, but he is unable to do this. Once he is located by Batman's cell phone sonar device, as discussed above, the police then jam all shortwave transmissions. In collaboration with the police, Batman prepares to tackle the Joker, who has placed himself inside a building full of hostages and henchmen. Batman enters the building first and discovers that the hostages and henchmen have actually been switched. Unable to communicate this fact to the police due to the short wave interference being generated to stop the Joker detonating the bombs, Batman is forced to attack the police to stop them from shooting innocent civilians. The destabilizing force of the Joker has led to Batman having to turn on the police for the good of the system; were police to shoot innocent civilians, it would show that the Joker was able to outwit them, undermining the processes of investment of ideological belief that maintains the system in its present form. Although Batman proves capable of both preventing the police from shooting the hostages and capturing the Joker, he does so by attacking the police—in other words, by becoming unpredictable. As a result of the concerns about the invasive nature of the technology mobilized by Batman, explicitly acknowledged in the film by Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman), the CEO of Wayne Enterprises, Batman's heroic position comes under sustained assault—even though he allows the technology to be destroyed.

Batman's use of violence against the police brings us to the third point under consideration, that of increasing similarities between hero and villain

in *The Dark Knight*. At the beginning of the second film, and throughout the first, Batman is predictable and audiences derive pleasure from this. As *The Dark Knight* progresses, Batman is forced to become increasingly flexible and unpredictable, culminating in his attack on the police and his murder of Harvey Dent, both of whom had been his partners in maintaining order. As Collins remarks, at this stage it becomes difficult to tell whether we are actually watching our heroes or "borderline psychotics dressed in the same costumes . . . but driven by entirely different motivations that might push them over the edge at any moment."[15] It therefore becomes necessary to consider what drives Batman to adopt this position of flexibility when his character had previously been defined as its opposite.

Ultimately, it is the unpredictability of the Joker that forces Batman to adopt a new attitude. The League of Shadows, driven by its fundamentalism, was a straightforward adversary; the Joker, on the other hand, is almost impossible to read. The Joker's lack of place is indicated when he is being held at the police station—his suit is custom-made and untraceable, and he has no identifiable fingerprints. In addition to this, there is the Joker's schizophrenic relationship to his origin story. Origin stories, although subject to constant minor revisions, form the foundation of a superheroic identity: the way in which a character is created not only provides that individual with the motivation to pursue the fight against crime, it also determines how that fight will be undertaken.[16] Batman's origin as a victim of petty crime in Gotham leads to, as Will Brooker states, the character's vigilante activities involving a "merely personal catharsis [derived] from beating up petty thugs like the one who killed his parents."[17] Batman's mission, then, is to eliminate crime and, in so doing, take revenge by proxy on the criminal who killed his parents.

As both Roy Cook and Eric Garneau point out elsewhere in this volume, no such certainties can be generated in connection with the Joker. Three different origins for the Joker are narrated during *The Dark Knight*, and it is only the intervention of Batman that prevents the existence of a fourth. Amid such uncertainty, it becomes impossible to firmly position the Joker—a task attempted in both *Batman: The Movie* and *The Dark Knight*, when the Joker is directly asked, "What do you want?" In *Batman*, the Joker (Jack Nicholson) responds by saying that he wants his face on the one dollar bill; in *The Dark Knight*, the Joker, who is being held in police custody at the time, says that he just wants his phone call. The phone call made by the Joker causes an explosion in the holding cells, suggesting that the more modern version of the Joker will use violence to resist any attempts to fix his image or position. The Joker in *Batman* wants recognition; the Joker in *The Dark Knight* wants

not to be recognized, not to be easily identifiable—no mean feat considering his manner of dress and distinctive facial scars. Identification, then, is not just visual—both the Joker and Batman are easily identifiable by their costumes—but also a pattern of behavior and a character history that can be used to predict future choices.

Despite evidence of the Joker's genius when it comes to planning, he uses his appearance to convince Dent that he is not the one responsible for Rachel's death. Dressed as a female nurse, complete with a wig and his trademark make up, the Joker asks, "Do I look like a guy with a plan? You know what I am? I'm a dog chasing cars. I wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it. You know, I just . . . do things." Although appearing to act on a whim is part of the Joker's plan, this further reinvention of himself continues to cast doubt on the Joker's "true" identity, and the unpredictability of the Joker can be seen to be at the root of Batman's gradual move away from the static concepts that have previously defined his character. It is questionable, though, whether Batman does enough to retain his position at the center of the narrative, both in terms of narrative drive and audience investment. The Joker, then, is not just disrupting society in the film; his character is also disrupting the ways in which audiences interact with heroic narratives. As a very general rule, audiences want to see the hero triumphant and the villain punished. The Joker begins to call this into question by becoming the center of the film, the character audiences most want to see.

As no less a source than Dennis O'Neil, long-time writer and editor at DC Comics, has noted, the villain is "the most important character in [the] story," and this certainly rings true in *The Dark Knight*.[18] Much of the publicity surrounding the film centered on Heath Ledger's portrayal of the Joker. Given the majesty of Ledger's performance and the posthumous Oscar he received, it seems likely that there always would have been more attention directed to the Joker than Batman. There was no mention of Christian Bale as an Oscar nominee, and no surprise at that, because Batman is ultimately flat, an absence. Batman's face is mostly covered and the part that is visible is kept free of emotion; the same goes for Batman's voice, a monotone growl in stark contrast to the Joker's skillful turns of phrase and greater expressivity. It is the Joker who jumps off the screen, who has presence, who provides the film with its narrative dynamic. Ultimately, Batman could be seen as something only made necessary by the presence of the Joker, his character left deliberately flat so as to make enough room for the exuberant presence of his enemy. In this approach, there is a strong possibility that the Joker becomes the more compelling character and, as a result, the audience want to see more of the

villain than the hero. Louis Althusser remarked that audiences have traditionally identified with "the hero, that is, with his time, with his consciousness, the only time and the only consciousness offered to [them]," a situation clearly subverted by *The Dark Knight* where multiple points of identification are on offer—Batman, the Joker, and the crowd.[19] Although the audience may want Batman to succeed, audience investment in the Joker means they have a similarly strong desire for the Joker to continue terrorizing Gotham for their enjoyment. The crowd, however, offers a different identification, as their implicit desire is that which Batman has explicitly stated—for a time when Gotham has no need of Batman. While Batman exists, there must necessarily be a counter force in operation; otherwise, there would be no need for Batman. However, Batman and those who oppose him are not aberrations of the system but symptoms, points at which the antagonism of society bursts through its civilized veneer; what the crowd desires is therefore a society devoid of such symptoms—effectively a new sociopolitical configuration.

The instability generated by the Joker therefore permeates all aspects of the film, from the narrative to the relationship between the audience and the hero. Although the Joker fails to bring Gotham society crashing down, he does succeed in separating Batman from the forces of order he was attempting to reinforce. Future research could look at the relationship over time and across different media in order to see if patterns emerge and if the approach pursued in this chapter could be applied profitably in other areas. In terms of *The Dark Knight*, the only thing that remains unquestioned is the connection between the Joker and Batman, the opposing forces of order and chaos. Brian Azzarello, a writer for DC, sums up this connection rather effectively, defining it in terms of "a disease":

> One that has been around longer than Gotham, the city infected. A disease that's older than any city. Hell, it's probably the same disease that built the first one. There will always be a Joker. Because there's no cure for him. No cure at all. Just a Batman.[20]

Here, Azzarello neatly captures the relationship between Batman and the Joker but also establishes firm connections to the idea of the Joker and Batman as Zizekian symptoms. The nature of their identity predates the characters and establishes them as manifestations of forces brought about through antagonisms in the system. Bent on destroying one another, they remain unaware that even mutual destruction would serve little purpose—others would rise to take their place. This is where the crucial difference arises between the idea of the Joker as a disease without a cure and a symptom in the Zizekian

sense: the Joker is not a symptom of a disease afflicting the system—the Joker is a symptom of the system itself. Neither character fully comprehends the nature of the system and their relationship to it. Batman seeks to eliminate the Joker and create a static, unchanging, and ordered system. This is impossible. The Joker, while acknowledging the chaos and the madness within the system, goes too far in the opposite direction; he seeks to destroy the system itself and let chaos reign, failing to account for the fact that what he sees as ideological numbness, the inability to look beyond present relationships of power, may in fact be an ideological commitment to the very system he denounces. As the ferry incident demonstrates, however, even the marginalized prefer the security of the system to complete uncertainty. And so the conflict between the Joker and Batman will play out endlessly; names, origins, and plans may change, but drives will remain the same.

Notes

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16. See, for instance, Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* (London: Continuum, 2004), 64–65; P. Sandifier, "Amazing Fantasies: Trauma, Affect and Superheroes," *English Language Notes* 46, no. 2 (2008), 177.

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18. Dennis O'Neil, *The DC Comics Guide to Writing Comics* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2001), 71.
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AFTERWORD

Will brooker

I began my PhD on Batman in 1996. That means I've spent eighteen years now—the life of the average first-year undergraduate—asking, whether through active academic engagement or simply as an ongoing puzzle at the back of my mind, who or what Batman is, how he functions, and what he means.

In thinking about Batman, as this volume confirms, we also think, by contrast, about Joker—about the archenemy who, more than anyone else, defines the Dark Knight.

I titled my two books *Batman Unmasked* and *Hunting the Dark Knight*—titles that suggest the truth about Batman can be revealed, or at least that it's worth seeking. "Joker Unmasked" would be a far more problematic concept, and "Hunting the Clown Prince" is an ever-ending project; in a way, it describes Batman's career since 1940. If Batman can't catch him in seventy-five years, surely scholars can't hope to pin him down in a single volume.

Robert Moses Peaslee, Robert G. Weiner, and their contributors aim for nothing so absolute, so unwisely ambitious. In fact, the book's subtitle—*Studies*—sums up its more modest but nevertheless important purpose. This study is a collection of attempts to assess and analyze Joker from various perspectives, and it's all the more significant because it's the first time anyone has seriously tried to do so.

The various perspectives are also invaluable, because just as Batman is a matrix, a mosaic, so Joker presents different facets of himself in different stories, by different authors, in different media, to different audiences of different decades. As he admits himself in a meta-commentary from Grant Morrison's late-2000s Batman run, he's evolved from Camp to Satire to New Homicidal. He's been clownish Cesar Romero, his moustache caked under white makeup, and the late Heath Ledger, licking his lips as if catching invisible insects. He's been the blank-faced Bowie lookalike of Miller's *Dark Knight*

Returns, near-catatonic in Arkham Asylum before Batman comes back, and the Thin White Duke of Death from Morrison's comics. He's been the carnival king of the 1989 Arkham Asylum's "Feast of Fools," his speech balloons scrawled in scarlet like a bloody ransom note or lipstick on a mirror; and he's been an NPC guide, a player avatar and a level designer in another *Arkham Asylum*, the video game of 2009. His textual graffiti returned in viral form across the online promotional campaign for Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), scribbling over official websites, and spilled over into street-level posters that either mocked or celebrated Barack Obama, depending on your point of view.

Joker's origin as the "Red Hood" was revisited in Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke*, and is read here as a crimson prism through which we can see Joker as the Marxist to Batman's capitalism; but that origin was itself rewritten, multiplied, and placed in question by Nolan's Joker, who told the story of his scars at least three different ways. Joker is, as these essays demonstrate, more than three different things; in almost seventy-five years, he's changed his mind about his history far more often than he's changed his trademark suit. If he has a past, he declares in *The Killing Joke*, he'd prefer it to be multiple choice. In *The Dark Knight*, he tells Batman, "You've changed things, forever." But he might as well be talking to himself.

Is he the epitome of postmodernism—a multiplex man, as superficial as the screens he grins from when teasing or tormenting Gotham in both Burton and Nolan's movies, the TV-shaped panels he occupies as a talking head in Miller's graphic novel, the monitors he uses to monitor Batman's progress in the video game? Is he a series of overlapping Internet windows, anonymous and anarchic as the online identities of 4chan, committing crimes just for the lulz? Harley Quinn, his on-and-off companion, describes him as a great modernist, an individual energy cutting through the stagnant late-capitalist status quo.

As a satirist of consumer society—ever since he mocked Batman's brand with his daft Jokermobile and utility belt loaded with jumping beans and sneezing power, back in the 1950s—Joker could surely never be a pop star, however much he seems to inspire and borrow from them. Prince has copied his costume and whiteface makeup; Gaga seems to echo his fractured, performative personalities and his appeal to an army of marginalized outsiders. (Why else does he keep attracting followers, when they always get killed or captured?) If Joker sometimes resembles a Bowie tribute act, he also, in early designs for his Arkham Asylum outfit, borrowed Madonna's stage costume.

Joker undeniably has something queer about him—which may be part of his appeal—in subversive contrast to the ordered, uptight Batman with his

rich-man's hobby dressed up as a crusade on crime. His playfulness exposes Batman's pretension and posturing; they're both play-acting, both figures from pantomime, but only Joker admits it. Yet Joker is also undeniably an abuser, with elements of misogyny in his monstrousness: look at the cycle of emotional and physical violence Harley Quinn seems locked into. Look, above all, at his extended sexual assault on Barbara Gordon, all for the sake of tormenting her father—or more significantly, for the sake of winning an argument against Batman.

In some lights, Joker seems harmless; in others, funny; in others, politically radical—but we should remember to see him not just in relation to Batman, as an opposing piece in a great game between larger-than-life hero and villain. We should also remember that Barbara/Batgirl has her own story of the Joker, which is rarely told from her point of view.

The Joker is shadow, fool, fluid, shifting. He cannot be pinned down in a single text, or even a series of texts. But throughout this collection, you will find a core emerging—similar or the same quotations, recurring across chapters. Multiple choice, super-sanity, "shuffling selves like a croupier deals cards." These essays, these attempts, cannot pin Joker down, and wisely they don't try. What they do identify is the heart of what Joker, like Batman, is about: change.

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